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Daniel Euphrat Bill Kte'pi Jason Sanford
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Shannon Dugan Iverson

edited by Adicus Garton, James Maddox, and Rev. Brian Worley

# i

# am this meat

Edited by Adicus Ryan Garton, James Maddox, and Rev. Brian Worley A Susurrus Press Anthology

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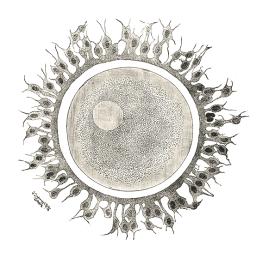
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#### Introduction



"I was those seeds, I am this meat
This meat hates pain, this meat must eat
This meat must sleep, this meat must dream
This meat must laugh, this meat must scream
But when, as meat, it's had its fill
Please plant it as a Daffodil"

— Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain,
in Kurt Vonnegut's Slapstick

# **Following Your Gut, Straight into the Tiger's** By Rev. Brian Worley

#### Sincerely,

Yes, I know, you didn't download this to read an introduction (let alone three). Or a preface, or an editor's note, or anything except for good stories. There are plenty of these, luckily, so I'll keep it short.

This anthology is based on the hope that there are other people like me in the world. That is to say, people who have two things in common with me. First, I suppose I'd refer to myself as an amateur psychologist. I'm extremely interested in why people do the things they choose to do. Collectively and individually, across all ages, lifestyles, and cultures, we do things that don't make any sense at all. While there is more than enough nonsense that seems to stem from our education, upbringing, etc., there's plenty more foolishness tied directly to our physiology.

Plenty of people like to point out that our "fight-or-flight" instinct

once served us quite well when we ran the daily risk of being eaten by sabertoothed beasties. *However*, they continue, it isn't very useful when we're trying to stay calm and collected during our boardroom presentation. Our bodies can't decipher an angry boss from a tiger.

In Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, when Death collects one's metaphysical remains, he often has a conversation that goes something like this:

Recently Deceased: "That man just killed me!"

DEATH: "YES, THESE THINGS HAPPEN."

Recently Deceased: "But he killed me! Why... why aren't I angry?"

DEATH: "AH. I SUSPECT THAT SORT OF THING REQUIRES GLANDS. YOU HAVEN'T GOT THOSE ANYMORE."

And indeed, glands seem to be responsible for many of our decision. We follow our hearts, and listen to our guts. Even if it leads us off a cliff, or into a tiger's belly.

We aren't happy with our bodies, either. We're constantly dieting, or getting tattoos, or combing hair over a bald spot. We're dyeing and waxing and exercising and wishing different parts were bigger or smaller or darker or lighter. We're always fighting with ourselves, because the part of us that isn't brain never seems to listen.

The second thing I hope you have in common with me is an unwillingness to limit oneself to a particular genre of literature. When asked "What do you like to read?", I'm always tempted to answer, "Books." I have difficulty getting more specific than that (and, considering that I read magazines and on-line journals, as well, "books" isn't the whole truth, either). As such, this is not an anthology of horror, or humor, or speculative fiction, or literary fiction or flash fiction or slipstream or SF. First and foremost, this is an anthology of good fiction (with the occasional poem). This anthology does include horror, humor, speculative fiction, literary fiction, etc. I have difficulty limiting myself by genre, because I have difficulty reading exclusively one. While I tend to be drawn to fiction that skirts the line between genres, I also have an appreciation for a good 100% SF story. Or 100% literary story. Or what have you. They say there's no accounting for taste, and I'm sure you won't agree with me on everything. (*I*'*m* not even sure I agree with me on everything.) I can say with confidence that this is a project I'm proud to have been a part of, and I hope you enjoy reading it half as much as I liked assembling it. Genre vs. literary vs. subgenres is an argument that is absent here.

Finally, a word about the organization of this anthology: In short, we did it all by feel. (Followed our gut instinct?) Why is a story that doesn't

necessarily discuss any body part in great detail listed under the "Skeletal" category? In short, it felt like it belonged there. And so, the stories in the "Circulatory" section deal with love, since love deals with the heart. And so on.

And now that I've said genre isn't important, the other editors will discuss it. After that, what you came here for. The stories. Sixteen works, plus three freebies from the editors. Enjoy.

I am fine. How are you?

Dear Reader, Rev. Brian Worley

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#### Warning: There Be Literature in These Pages.

By James Maddox

Literature: *n*. Written works; esp. those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit.

Confession time. I love literature, but I believe only a few people know what that really means to me. I love Raymond Chandler just as much as I love Raymond Carver; I love Kenzaburo Oe as much as I love Banana Yoshimoto; and I love Stephen King as much as I love Susan Sontag. As far as I'm concerned, all of these people have written some undeniably fantastic works.

When speaking of literature, my mind rarely sticks to Dostoevsky, Fitzgerald, or even Melville. That's not to say that these aren't influential writers, quite the opposite is true. I just find the works of Kafka, Calvino, Auster, and many, many others to be just as effective in their storytelling; they also keep my eyes scanning with vigor and enthusiasm; they also keep the pages turning.

For me, these writers and their stories are important enough to transcend that stuck-up stigma attached to the word "Literature," as well as do it justice.

I think it was when I read the stories "Delicious" and "When Everyone Comes to Your Birthday Party" that I knew *I Am This Meat* was going to stack up to the expectations I had for it. I read these stories, and I knew that we had tapped into something good.

Going as far back as when Susurrus Press started, we as editors knew that the goal for every issue was to publish fiction that had more going for it that just being strangely entertaining. We didn't want to release a bland style of fiction onto the masses. We wanted to compete with all those publications out there that we thought were doing good in the fiction world, starting with *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and *EscapePod* and ending with the *McSweeney's* and *Salt Hill*.

Our stories needed to say something real; they needed to have a strong emotional attachment; and then, once that criteria was met, they needed to not be boring as all get out or too high-handed.

Translation: They needed to be our idea of literature.

In my opinion, I feel that we've achieved our goals. Maybe not everyone will agree with me on that point, and certainly not for every story, but some of the stories found in *I Am This Meat* aren't just one's I'm proud to have published, they're also stories that I'm glad to have read. The best of them stick with you long after you've finished reading them, their words and

plots come back to you in the strangest moments and remind you of what a good story can accomplish.

We're running strong on readers that feel the exact same way as we do about fiction. If you happen to be one of them, then you've probably skipped all this boring shit and gone straight to the stories. If you happen to be new to the fold, let me be the first to say welcome, and introduce you to some stories that deserve to be recognized for all the things that make literature powerful, timeless, and loved.

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# From the Demented Desk of Dr. Diablo, M.D., Ph.D, D.D., Mad Scientist

By Adicus Ryan Garton

I have tried zombies. I dabbled with Frankenstein's monster. I played with werewolves and vampires. Genetics—you know, clones and mutations and viruses: the X-men, the Incredible Hulk. I went historical with Mr. Hyde and Dracula. I tried aliens and robots. And for all that, after three thousand words worth of false starts and as many paragraph fragments as people have fingers and toes (normal people, not the guy who eats his own fingers), I've decided that the stories here cannot be summed in a neat little introduction that compares them to Frankenstein or the Fiend. There are stories here that could be likened to vampires or werewolves but there are not enough for an introduction that focuses on vampires or werewolves. It couldn't do justice to the stories that do not contain those elements. There are zombies and clones and aliens and ghosts, but none of those are perfect, either.

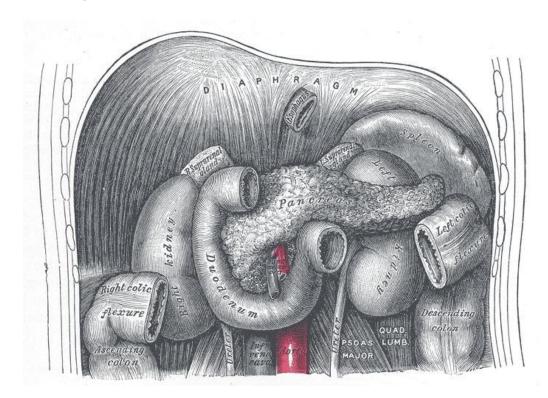
In essence, this anthology is singular, *unique*. It steers away from the shackles of literature, of SF, of fantasy, of horror, of slipstream, although most of the stories fall into one or more of those categories. It's just too fucking hard to pin down with one metaphor, one analogy—with a frilly comparison to some *other* kind of story.

All that being said, there are no vampires here. There are no werewolves or zombies or clones, but sometimes there's something close. I think the most important central theme here is that these stories are about people, as figuratively or literally as you want to take it.

And in my experience, the best stories are the ones about people. Anything else I try to write is just so much editorial fluff. Enjoy.

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# I. Digestive



It is a sign of a dull nature to occupy oneself deeply in matters that concern the body; for instance, to be over much occupied about exercise, about eating and drinking, about easing oneself, about sexual intercourse.

Epictetus

#### Bad Enough

#### By Kristi Petersen

From where she was standing, it was a long way down.

It was a good thing, she figured, that she wasn't afraid of heights. She'd never been. Even as a five-year-old, when she was far too young to be riding rollercoasters by herself, she was able to get on without anyone stopping her. She was so big-boned that she was well above the height level marked on those Midway signs that insisted "you must be this tall to ride this ride."

Not that she was obese, or, what people would call "fat" — she wasn't; she was just a big kid. Her meaty legs were powerful enough to kick out a window (she'd done it once when her family's second-story apartment had a kitchen fire when her parents weren't home); her breasts were two giant melons (do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, just on to a 34-B cup right away. Forget this "training bra" crap). As a teen, she'd never had the privilege of running around in midriff-open tops, and she envied the tan girls with little pouches of bellies who ran around bra-less on hot summer nights while she sweat a gallon under a hot cotton blanket of wires and thick straps.

She knew she didn't have to be thin to be sexy. She'd seen women who were considerably shorter and plumper than she, not having the advantage of height to spread some of it thin. Some of these women had elephant-trunk legs, and their knees dimpled and roiled with extra flaps of skin; some of them had cantaloupe breasts, beach-ball bellies and shelf-asses. But these women, confident and even daring, paraded in front of their men like they were every bit as sleek as last month's centerfolds. And so, when she thought about it, she realized it wasn't necessarily their thinness she desired—it was their comfort with their own portliness. She had tried many times to accept the way she was built (*like a brick shithouse*, her father had once said). She had told herself, "I should love me the way I am, and just control what I eat so I don't get too heavy, and that should be enough." She'd bought more expensive, tailored clothes, make-up that you could only purchase from a china-dolled-up beauty consultant and not in a department store like the Dollar Dayz an hour away. She'd even redecorated her

bedroom windows with pretty, sheer curtains in silver, gold, and pink sparkly trim. But she had to confess that despite all these attempts, her skewed thinking hadn't changed. So the only other alternative, which was the one she almost always arrived at after weeks of upheaval, weeks of breaking down whatever it was around her that she'd decided would do the trick this time, was to try another diet.

She had tried every diet known to woman. The 2000-calorie-a-day thing. The packaged-frozen-meal thing. The super-teas-that-madeeverything - even -her-eyelids - sweat thing. The box-of-laxatives-after-youeat-a-big-meal thing, the low-carb thing, the two-shakes-and-a-sensibledinner thing, the exercise-at-the-gym-two-hours-a-day thing, the citrus-fruitand-dry-English-muffin thing, the smelly-cabbage-soup thing. She had tried them all: every supplement, every vitamin, every strict regimen. Nothing had worked. Despite her peering at herself in her bathroom mirror (the one that had cracked when she'd moved to her trailer next door to Rainforest Park, a five-dollar attraction on Route 501 that boasted exotic birds but was simply a sad display of shabby, lightning-burnt pine trees surrounding decrepit bird cages and a lone filthy goose poised on a mound of dirt) and resolving at the cusp of each diet that "in just two weeks, my clothes should start falling off me – well, if not that, then at least be a little looser", five or six days went by and she saw nothing significant. Then she was back in the supermarket again, loading up her cart with foods that confused her because after the failure of every diet she didn't know what to eat anymore.

She stood in the check-out line behind some Twiggy in a bright red tank dress and matching heels yakking on her cell in such a way it brought squirrels to mind, and flipped through magazines beckoning purchase with promises of super-celebrity diets or "if I can do it, you can too! 14 days to a size 4." And that was the day that it occurred to her, surveying her cart crammed with frozen meals, some of those shake things, a couple of pounds of raw steak, 80% lean hamburger and a bag of citrus fruits: the only thing she hadn't tried was not shopping. Specifically, not eating. Oh, sure. She'd been warned about how that doesn't really work, that the weight comes back in no time flat; she'd even seen a documentary on TV where a girl was so thin the bones in her rear-end could splinter if she was not placed by nurses on a couch in just a certain way. But that would surely never happen to her. That would surely never happen to her because she was only going to do it for a month or so. One month, that would be all. And if it worked, and it was sure to work because it was the only thing she hadn't tried, she'd at last feel like she could buy any clothes she wanted. And then perhaps, when she went to the Lightning Rod – the bar decorated with flashing lights and garage doors that pulled up to let the heat of the South Carolina summer

dissipate — men would turn their heads and think, 'what a looker, I wish I could have a piece of that'. And then perhaps, she'd be able to drive her convertible with confidence, buy a bright polka-dot pink scarf to tie about her hair, get some dark glasses, put on some lipstick, and feel sexy.

She did not pretend that day after day of eating nothing would be easy. What she needed was to isolate herself from food of any kind. Beyond that: she needed removal to a world under her absolute control. A place where there would be no temptations, no cookies or candy, nothing that was bad for her, no social invitations with friends to the pizza parlor that could derail her diet the more and more beer she consumed (because the more beer she consumed, the more complacent she became, so the more she allowed herself to indulge, only the next morning to arise, hate herself, and vow to start over).

When the experiment had first crept into her head, it had been an amusing proposition. Then it had grown into a fantasy, as in, "what if I *could* do that?" Then it had slowly mutated to seem, with her phone calls, plausible and affordable. She would station herself way up on the 16<sup>th</sup>-floor balcony of a Myrtle Beach oceanfront high-rise, locked out of her \$52/night suite (good rates—it was mid-August, after all), taking as her source of inspiration the skinny girls below who would surely one day be lamenting their own physical demise as a consequence of childbearing. She was convinced that she would be miraculously forty pounds thinner by the end of the month.

The Golden Beach Pagoda, the hotel was called, so there were Chinese dragons on all the corresponding note paper, towels and matchbooks. She'd had more than a few initial reservations about choosing this particular spot for her experiment. She adored older places, but most of them had a hard time surviving in this era: the days of people knowing how to entertain themselves were long gone. The older places couldn't afford all the stupendous features that kept today's frenetics busy, so they very often lost money and became run-down, not even updating their signage. The Golden Beach Pagoda was one such place. It was clean, had just undergone a couple of fresh coats of paint, but it had a sign that had probably been painted five decades ago. The dancing dragon peeled in places so that when he was lit up at night, it was like his creator had changed his mind and erased parts of him. It also didn't help that being un-politically correct seemed to be okay. Mr. Dragon was free to dance about in all his slanty-eyed glory and proclaim, by means of a cartoon-bubble, that his hotel was "Emperor favorite place by ocean!" But it had what she wanted: a high floor, and sliders that locked from the inside when you closed them.

She was not as experienced as a competitor for the Guinness Book of

World Records, but she was also not a fool: she'd been camping, and she saw to it that all of the necessary precautions had been taken, that as many comforts – what could be possible on a 10x12 balcony, anyway – had been provided. She had a tent, pinioned to the clearly-hurricane-battered and rusted air conditioner, its thin ribbings plied with crusts of reddish salt layers; she had three flannel blankets, a sleeping bag - though pink and slightly small because it had been a gift from her parents on her 9<sup>th</sup> birthday - six cases of bottled water, four boxes of diet pills, and a Rubbermaid tub full of lettuce of every kind, tomatoes, onions, and low fat dressing (there was still a wisp of that "starving doesn't work" advice present in her head, and so she knew she couldn't subsist on nothing). She had a small library of material she'd wanted to read years ago, and a battery-operated television with four spare fully-charged batteries, in case she got really bored. She also had a notepad, pens, envelopes and stamps (she could address them and toss them over the balcony – someone below would pick them up and see that they got to a mailbox, she was sure of that), and a few ten-for-a-buck postcards she'd gotten at one of the gift shops – Wings or Whales – that advertised "free hermit crab with \$20 purchase." Yes, she'd run herself up to \$20 with a couple of other items so she'd have the crab in a cage as a friend someone to talk to—and she'd named him Antigone. She had also secured basic necessities – a dishpan, spring water to brush her teeth and some suntan lotion so she wouldn't burn. She had a table and a chair. She had a carton of cigarettes too: even though she didn't smoke, she'd heard it was a wonderful deterrent, something in the hand replacing something in the mouth—and even though the breezes coming off the ocean could be more than just a little disruptive, she figured matches could still be of use. The four-cup coffee maker was possible due to the hotel's outdoor electrical outlet—she'd spent weeks making calls to ensure that particular amenity. She even had a make-up mirror so that when she got thinner, she could make herself pretty enough stand up and wave to the men below at 11:00 at night, feigning that she was just another partier doing something crazy. She was completely prepared – she'd even taken care to hook the flimsy plastic DO NOT DISTURB sign on her hotel room door, so she'd have no interruption by the minimum-wage maids and their carts mounded high with towels.

Post-experiment arrangements had also occurred to her: what about, she'd thought, getting down when the month was up? No one would hear her cry for help over the beach winds; her voice would be spirited away like the seeds of a flower. She felt she'd also planned well for that occasion: she had a thick coil of heavy rope used for boating, and a stack of \$1.99 bed sheets to tie on (to give the rope weight, so it wouldn't blow about, and so it

would hit its target more effectively), with a note that said, "Help—I'm locked out on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor. Please send someone up to let me in." Her note she'd penned with a permanent waterproof marker on thick paperboard she'd purchased at the craft store—it wouldn't rip or blow around as much as paper would—and she'd taken care to get a neon color, something bright and sure to catch the attention, a construction-cone orange. The rope, at two-hundred and fifty feet (she'd done the calculations: a 16-story building in Cincinnati measured 210 feet tall, so she figured this estimate couldn't be too far off), would reach the sandy concrete patio next to the pool where, at least most of the day, there would be people lounging, hats and clear plastic visors firmly crowning their heads, reading their books or watching their kids. It was assured. Someone would see it. Someone would send for help.

She had overlooked one thing: when she crawled into her sleeping bag, she wished she'd thought to buy an air mattress—she hadn't realized that the Astro-turf covered concrete would be so slate-hard, and this lack of attention to detail only betrayed that her parents had been too well-prepared when they'd been camping. She was so used to sleeping on air mattresses, she'd actually forgotten that's what it was that made sleeping out in the woods so comfortable.

Despite the cool breezes in the morning hours, if she sat in the sun, she found she was quite warm. She could feel the chill associated with sunburn, that fever-type chill, that, instead of making her feel ill, made her feel strangely healthy. Like the sun had burnt every bad thing off of her skin, had melted every bad thing in her bones away until all that was left was raw and pure and sinless, and that was why the body shivered so, for it wasn't used to being without its thickened blanket of iniquities. So when she was done here, not only would she be thin, she would be tan, too—perhaps not what would be considered a bronze goddess, but, at least, she would have gotten some color.

She could tell she was hungry—there was a growl in her belly—but it was masked heavily by the appetite suppressants, so when she felt the desire for more salad, or when she felt she was going to threaten her meager food supply by ripping off the cover of the tub, dumping the entire bottle of salad dressing over the sixteen or seventeen heads of lettuce, two dozen tomatoes, pound of onions and four cans of olives, making a giant salad big enough, perhaps, to sit and soak in just as though she were in a jacuzzi, she popped another pill. The smoking thing wasn't working well—she was having trouble figuring out how to light the cigarette—but she wasn't desperate enough for that measure—yet.

Most days she watched the surf roll in, roll out. Sometimes there was a dolphin, or what she thought was a dolphin, leaping in a gray arc over the water; sometimes, there were big shrimp boats, seesawing like rocking horses in the waves. Sometimes she saw something glowing in the water, a spot of pink or white that would be there and then vanish just as a blinking light would. She thought they were phosphorescent animals, maybe, or perhaps, she was just seeing the white sides of seagulls. She'd forgotten to bring her binoculars and was sorry she had – simply because there was another activity that would help the time to pass. She didn't want to rip through her dozen books all at once, and she'd already finished one, a mystery about a famous poet's body found walled up in the very museum that was supposedly his original home. The battery-operated TV she decided to only watch twice a day – for news. Nothing that wasn't necessary. She knew she could re-charge the batteries by using the outdoor outlet, but had decided that, since she'd lost the unit's AC adapter and therefore could no longer plug it in directly, she deserved punishment for being so irresponsible with such an expensive Christmas gift from her former boyfriend who'd confessed he liked his women "soft as a pillow". She'd had a good one, there. He didn't care that she'd towered over him or that she was a little dimply in the derriere. But she also hadn't wanted to "settle". She was still convinced she had a chance at finding her rock star if she were only thinner.

In the mornings, the sun rose white over the gray-green sea and moved behind pale purple clouds, bleeding through them like the ray-hand of God upon the sea's creatures; in the afternoons, she caught her tan, and in the evenings, especially on the weekends, she amused herself—following the news, of course—with watching young lovers walk off their romantic meals, staunch men with dogs shining their flashlights about, looking for treasure or shells, and later, after midnight, drunken revelers back from the bars who always seemed underdressed for the weather running into the breakers and the surf, howling like mad wolves and jumping about. These she liked best. It was like watching a car accident—she knew half of them, if not all, would go back to their lives and just two days later would more than likely be sick with pneumonia or some other damn thing. Adults could still be as stupid as children.

By the second week, the waistband of her denim skirt was loose. This thrilled her, and she wished she'd brought a scale. She was starving, but this, if she was seeing results, was as good as if someone had presented her with a three-tiered chocolate cake.

It was also, however, when she was beginning to regret this decision. Things were not going as planned. Despite all of her efforts, she was bored. And lonely. Antigone the crab had given up the ghost toward the end of the first week (she had offered his pathetic remains to the seagulls and terns) and even though the postcard/letter trick seemed to be working (she

was composing great fictions about what a lovely time she was having on vacation, telling her recipients about bars and restaurants she was eating at, roller coasters and Ferris Wheels she was riding in her mind) she'd used up her ten-for-a-buck postcards and was running out of paper and stamps. She was already through her sixth book, and if she worked harder at spacing out her reading periods, she supposed she could make them last longer. The salad, because she had neglected to figure out a way of bringing and keeping a constant supply of ice to her corner of seclusion, was beginning to wilt, and the tomatoes and the plastic in the bin took on the strong odor of onions; when she opened the bin, the hot stink would rush upon her like the breath of a baloney-feasting dog. But there was something else unsettling about her predicament, something she hadn't planned on as well: time to think.

She was not the sort of person who liked thinking. For that reason, she had not gone to college, choosing instead to work her way up to district manager at a local chain of craft stores. Numbers and profit margins, ordering and supervision came much more easily to her than did trying to solve the complex problems faced by, say, a nurse, or a teacher. And since she had management experience, she thought, if she got bored with staring at catalogs full of yarn and deciding, based on supplier price, what that yarn would cost, she could work at a hotel. There were plenty of hotels—like this one – not even an hour from her house. And that was the way her life went, following the same pattern it had when she'd gotten her first dollhouse. Her mother had it gotten second-hand, and it had chipped wallpaper in its kitchen and a bathroom toilet that had a broken seat, only it was glued to the dollhouse floor and it couldn't be replaced unless the entire floor and all of the other furniture—claw foot tub, sink, and dresser for linens—were to be replaced as well. So she'd lived with it. Any problem that was too daunting to solve, any problem that required too much thought, was a problem to be avoided.

Her favorite part of the news was the weather. There were never any problems, so she wasn't required to think about it. Weather this time of year, save for the occasional storm, was pretty clear, warm until the end of September when it cooled down slightly, and she was looking forward to cooler afternoons, believe it or not, because she was, most definitely, getting too much color. She laughed, thinking of herself as a crispy chicken, probably because, after the fourteenth salad, she had spotted a family way down on the pool patio with a take-out bucket of the stuff. She also thought of herself as a bright pink spare rib or an angry red lobster, probably because of the advertisers that sponsored the weather reports: "come on down to Pork's Beach BBQ!" "Snap into some crazy crab legs or NEW fried lobster tail bites... with or without butter."

It was then she realized she had to stop watching the weather for awhile, not because she wasn't curious, but because of the commercials. The enticement of what she knew were really just plastic models of food was too upsetting and tantalizing for her to watch, sending her stomach into paroxysms of spasms. Spasms of hunger. She supposed she didn't need the weather reports anyway; she could deduce the changing of seasons from what went on at the beach.

It seemed there were fewer and fewer families picnicking on the patios below, fewer people lounging around the pool, but it didn't concern her. Then one day, she noticed that the usual staff—the gentlemen who drove white "Beach Patrol" trucks who set out the small, snail-shell-like cabanas every morning well before dawn, then repeated the process in reverse every evening around dusk—did not come around. The cabanas reminded her of escargot—well, blue and yellow and striped and polka dotted escargot, of course—especially when a guy with a shovel piled sand along their broad backs, possibly to better steel them against the oncoming surf, and tides, and winds. She had seen beach goers swarm around them, then at eight o'clock, empty them, calling it a night and coming inside to shower and perhaps dress themselves nicely for dinners at seafood shacks or fine steakhouses on the pier. But on this day that process didn't happen. There were none to be found. Where were the cabanas?

The jeans she climbed into at night were now getting loose. For the first time in many days, her gaze fell upon the coil of rope and piles of sheets, her escape route, in the corner at the bottom of a dribble of rust that plummeted from the air conditioner down the sand-textured paint. It beckoned her, as though it was a coy snake and she was its charmer, but somehow an ancient spell had reversed and she was under its pull. Perhaps, she thought, she was just crazed with hunger. She was certain she hadn't reached a goal weight, and she cursed herself again for not getting herself a scale in which to keep track of it, but she supposed it would have created a problem if she'd begun this process at 160 pounds and after two weeks of starvation the needle was stuck at just 158. She could get down, consider getting down. Perhaps she'd lost enough weight, and it was time to abandon this silly balcony and get back to her life. Something inside her was telling her, in fact, like an alarm in the middle of a dream, that there was a problem, that something wasn't right. Up here, not only could she hear the sound of the wind from the sea, she could, if the day were calm, hear the roar of traffic out on Ocean Boulevard, at the opposite side of the hotel. (She had specifically requested that she not be able to see the road from her room just in case there were too many enticements, like ice cream shops or people walking by with fast-food cheeseburgers in their hands, happily munching

away.) But she couldn't hear traffic. Also, she seemed to notice a lack of seagulls and terns. They hadn't kept her company so much as they'd been a nuisance, swooping into her 10x12 every time she pulled out her meager rations. But now there seemed to be so few of them, and smaller, weaker ones, too. She didn't know what that meant, exactly, but she sensed that it meant something, this clearing out of the brutish birds that bullied and even fought over the occasional piece of quickly-wilting onion that she dropped on the patio floor.

After a week with no television and no revelers to watch in the night, two days after she didn't see any more cabanas and she had to chuck one of the tomatoes that had been at the bottom of her bin for it had gone soft, mushy and heavy with black-white mold, she heard something like construction—hammers banging, even the occasional yell or jackhammer cutting through the wind and the waves. These sounds of progress were a sharp reminder that life was going forward without her, and it made her lonely. She wanted someone or something to keep her company. And so, even though she would be tempted by food commercials and surely it would drive her right into the arms of the hemp and cotton snake in the corner, she turned on the battery-operated TV.

The man she recognized as her friendly Channel 8 Beach TV Weather forecaster didn't look right. He had ditched his usual suit and tie for a bright red Hawaiian shirt, and he wasn't in front of a traditional weather map. Instead, he sat in what looked to be a beach bungalow, and his long gray hair wasn't tied back; in fact, he looked a little unkempt, as though someone had roused him from a face-down sleep in a bar named after an exotic bird. He rubbed his eyes and told the audience – tourists and residents alike – that Hurricane Vortigern was almost here. And this hurricane, true to its violent usurper of a namesake, was not a Category 1 or 2, but a Category 5. The likes of which has never been seen in these parts since the worst one, Hazel, which was only a Category 4. "If you have not already evacuated, then you must do so, for it is predicted to make landfall in just a few short hours, and the last of the windows should be boarded up." The TV showed cars crawling past HURRICANE EVACUATION ROUTE signs, the ones with the white symbol that looked like a pizza cutter blade. They were all up and down Route 501, near where she lived.

Where she lived. Where she lived that she probably wouldn't see again. Category Five! And she was on the beach-side. She'd be killed! Crushed! Pummeled! What if the building were simply blown away or swallowed by the vomiting sea? What if a wave truly could reach the 16<sup>th</sup> floor? What if that were possible? There was no way, no way she could go through with her plan now to drop the rope and hope someone saw her;

they were all gone. Back from whence they came or, if they lived nearby, probably with relatives in other states.

They were gone, and she was in very big trouble.

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### Rotting

#### By Shannon Dugan Iverson

"I'm sleeping with Tim," she said when she got in the door. Plain as that.

I punched her, hard, right fist to the jaw. Plain as that.

I heard something pop.

She called the police.

The police called an ambulance.

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The cops came by to tell me that she had agreed to drop the charges if I would pack up everything and leave within two days. What else could I do? Everything that I owned I put into storage at the U-Store-It, and I put myself in a motel outside of town.

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I called her the next week, tipsy, crying a little. "I want to come back home."

"You're a bastard." She sounded funny, like she was chewing her words.

"I know I am."

"So stop calling." She hung up.

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I stopped eating meat after that. We are what we eat, and I wasn't going to go on being a predator. The questions were as obvious as their answers: What kind of man hits his wife? (*A violent bastard*.) Who is more peaceful than a vegetarian? (*No one*.) They watch the world spin around with its missiles and car bombs and respond by saving the rabbits with their politically correct consumer choices, and when they hear of war they picket and chant at reasonable volumes for the world wake-up. I wasn't sure how much this was going to change, but I figured it was worth a shot. It was difficult living in the motel and only having the Denny's nearby, so I looked through the papers for some sort of vegetarian support-club. Later I learned that vegetarians don't generally feel that they need emotional support

simply because they've given up meat, though they do sometimes have cooking clubs and the like. I joined up with an organization of kids that made food for bums out of discarded vegetables and waited for my predator-tainted bloodstream to adjust to bananas and burnt leeks.

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I must have been at least twenty-five years older than the oldest kid in the V-Spot. They were all wild-eyed little peace-loving Punk Rock fanatics, and they were going to change the world. They were sure of it. Anything that you said to the contrary was met with an annoyed look and a segue into the newest adorably creative plan to create a skating rink out of the abandoned grocery store down the street or carpooling information to get down to Washington, D.C. to protest the newest atrocities. They were brave, in their way, brave enough to be prey and not strike back, even though they could have. They would stare a cop in the face as he sprayed them with tear gas or beat them with his bully club; like a cornered possum they would go limp and pretend to die. Never would they fight back, of course – you didn't want to become what you hated. When I was a kid myself they had peace and flowers and all that shit, but what I remembered the most were the bombs and the shootouts. They even got the *president*, for god's sake. But that kind of behavior wasn't really hip anymore, I learned. You fell down, you got thrown in jail, you sang and you screamed, but you didn't bomb anyone. "We're not terrorists," a kid named Big Mac said to me when I asked him why they didn't just try to dynamite the pentagon or something. "We're not about to sink to their level. Now, who's coming to the inauguration of the community garden tomorrow?"

The very fact that they would never 'sink' was, I realized, the reason that I got to be there at all. I was no martyr, and other than my newly adopted diet I had 'Normal' written all over me. If they had been like the Cops, or like the Yuppies, or like the Corporations, I would have been just another sorry bourgeois schmuck. But they, being the gentle creatures that they were, were Open to Other Points of View, and that meant that my presence had to be tolerated, and that they were forced by some unwritten code both to enlighten me and to learn something from me. I wasn't sure how much there was for them to learn from a guy like me, but it was nice the way they tried.

Connie (short for *Constellation*, she said) was the one I liked best. She was tiny, with giant dots tattooed across her face in some sort of triballooking pattern. I thought that she might be pretty without all of those dots all over her face, but mostly I liked her because she was also the only one who could cook. Every Saturday morning, when we surveyed the vast

amount of vegetables and stale bagels and bread that were the overripe harvest of dumpsters and donations, she would stand at the table and take it in. Everyone else set in immediately, offering suggestions of yet another curried stew. But Connie would stand there staring at the rotting vegetables until something in her mind clicked, and then she would just announce whatever idea had come into her mind, and everyone would bustle around asking her what vegetables to chop or what spices to get out. It was like watching a Zen master meditate, I thought, though I had never seen a Zen master meditate. She would just be perfectly calm, orchestrating the stove and the chopping and her punk rock minions, and at the end there would be a gorgeous, delicious *ratatouille* made from garbage, ready for distribution on the street corners to whoever cared to eat it.

We were the only ones who ate the food, really. Every once in awhile, after seeing the giant sign reading "FREE FOOD!" that we hung up on whatever corner we happened to park ourselves on, a person who looked more or less down-and-out would drop by and have a plate or two of fried rice or cream-of-carrot soup. Sometimes even a 'normal' sort of person would dare to come by and have a bite, but the questions always came. The problem was that the kids were too eager to let on the source of all of their food. "And can you imagine, all of this from stuff that people *threw away!*" someone would always say to the normal-ish person, usually halfway through a spoonful of his soup.

"What do you mean?" He would say, trying hard to swallow what he had already put into their mouth and quickly abandoning the rest.

"It's all from *dumpsters*!" the V-Spot representative would inevitably cry triumphantly. "Just think of what we could do if we started to *give* all of this away instead of *throwing* it away! We could literally end hunger!"

"Yes, well, really great what you guys are doing... really great... well, I really should be going... thanks for everything...." Then he'd split, walking too quickly in the opposite direction of where he'd been headed before.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for dessert?" One of them would call after him, usually Big Mac. "We've got apple pie!" Big Mac was especially fond of baiting the 'Normal' people and watching them enjoy a plateful of their own garbage. I knew how he felt. There was something in every bite of their food that was like their own non-violent version of revenge. Connie didn't see it that way; she just liked to cook and felt good about feeding people. But for Big Mac every time that a 'Normal' guy took a bite of our food and said "Mmmmm" it was a small personal victory, and every time that they vomited after hearing about the origin of the food it was a huge personal victory. We were pigs, all of us who demanded fresh bagels when there were old ones to be eaten, and the little bit of vengeance that the

V-spot garnered from feeding the city's garbage back to them tasted sweeter to Mac than his vegan apple pie.

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I picked up a donation-drive shift on Friday nights, where I would drive around to the local co-ops and sympathetic groceries and take away their old produce. I was happy to help, even if I knew that I had gotten the assignment because I was the only one out of the group who had a car. The vegetables were starting to make my car stink to high hell, a smell that no amount of sprays or cleansers would get out. I resigned myself to it- it felt good to be doing something, and it turned me into something other than just the old quiet guy in the corner.

I saw my wife one of those Fridays when I was out making my rounds. I was carrying out a crate of old cabbage to my car in the parking lot of the U-Sav-It when I saw her fumbling for her keys under the lamplight. I nearly dropped the crate when I saw her.

Tim, the cowardly son of a bitch, was nowhere to be seen. Apparently he wasn't willing to pick up *all* of the husbandly duties.

I wasn't sure whether to look away or to just pretend that I didn't see her or what. We were almost the last people there, only a few cars scattered here and there in the parking lot, probably the last few employees that were closing the place up. I decided to just go about business as usual. I opened my trunk, put in the crate of cabbage, and slammed it shut. Maybe, I thought with a little bit of hope, maybe she would notice me and ask me what I was doing here, and I would tell her about making food for the poor and being a vegetarian and everything, and she would see what a saint I had become since she left me. Since she kicked me out.

I slammed the door of the trunk and she screamed, searching more rapidly for her keys in her purse and coming up with a can of pepper spray. To my great surprise, she pointed the thing at me.

"So, you're fucking *following* me now?" She sounded the same as she had on the phone, funny, mumbling. I realized that her jaw had been wired shut. "Don't you *dare* take a step closer! I swear to *god* I will empty this can in your fucking eyes!"

"No! No, really I'm not!" I had my hands up in the air, stupidly, as if I were under arrest or something.

"Shut up! Now get on the ground..."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm fucking serious! Get on the ground! I'm going to look for my keys and you are going to stay right there, on the ground, and you're not going to get up until I drive away, got it? You don't have a gun, do you?" I got on the ground, on all fours. What else could I do?

She emptied her purse onto the pavement, all the while keeping the can pointed at me while her lipsticks and tissues went rolling off in all directions. She picked up her keys, stuffed everything back into her purse with one hand and kept the spray can steadily pointed at me with the other. She backed around the front of her car, slowly, feeling with her free hand for the contours of the car like some stupid police movie. Then she got into the driver's seat fast, screeched into reverse, and was gone.

She had left her groceries sitting there on the pavement. I sat back against my car and looked up at the sky.

I felt like shit.

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I didn't go in to cook until the following Saturday morning. Connie wasn't there, a girl named Sara B. told me. "Probably the same bug you had," she said. I, of course, hadn't let on that I didn't chop vegetables with them the previous week because I had wanted to stay in my motel drinking Bud Light and feeling like a sorry asshole. I was sick, all right, but not in a way that I was going to explain in any great detail.

With Connie gone, the kitchen was chaos. We were lucky that we didn't all accidentally stab each other. The power vacuum was enormous, and everyone was chopping and frying and baking in a frenzy to fill up the void that Connie had left behind her. I just wanted someone to tell me what to cut up, and everyone did, contradicting themselves and fighting over the choice ingredients.

Big Mac stepped in after someone spilled flour all over the kitchen floor.

"All right, people, what are we making?"

Everyone calmed down a little bit after that, as if the simple action of just asking them what they were doing was enough to make them actually think about it and get it done in some sort of orderly fashion. By the midafternoon we had a giant pot of curried bananas, an unappetizing pot full of stewed spinach, and ten loaves of banana bread. We had a lot of bananas.

We headed out with all of our food to the nearest corner. Connie would usually suggest hiking a dozen blocks or so, so that different parts of the neighborhood could enjoy the food. Today, though, we were tired, and lugging around all of the pots and dishes and silverware was not something that the collective mood would allow for. We hung up our sign, served ourselves some food, and sat on the curb to eat and to talk.

No one came, not even the bums. Not even any friends. It was a good thing, too, because all of it was utterly inedible. Even the banana bread,

which had come to be my favorite part of almost every meal that we had, was on this Saturday morning burnt on the top and sides. That could have been all right, but I was pretty sure that someone had mistaken the salt for sugar. We all just sort of sat there on the curb, picking at our food and trying to avoid the subject of how bad it was. Wasting wasted food was almost as bad, I could tell, as wasting perfectly good food. I thought about my wife's bag of abandoned groceries sitting in the parking lot of the U-Sav-It.

Big Mac and a smaller guy called L.J. got bored and got up. "We're gonna go check out that dumpster on the corner," Mac said. "Anybody wanna come?"

"I'll go," I said, putting my dishes in the big plastic restaurant bin that we kept near the food. I had never been in a dumpster before, and these guys seemed like they could build a house and furnish it with surround sound and antique chairs, from the things they talked about finding in them.

We walked halfway down the block. The dumpster was in an alleyway between two apartment buildings. The two of them swung the top of the dumpster wide open and just hopped right in. "Are you coming, old man?" Big Mac asked me.

"All right..." I struggled to swing myself over the side of the thing. It was bigger than it looked and they had to pull me over so that I didn't fall back onto the concrete. For the most part, it seemed to be filled with old pieces of torn-up wood from someone's remodeling project. I just stood there while the boys sifted through the junk, unsure of what I was supposed to be looking for.

"Nothing too great in here, huh?" said L.J.

"Naw, not really," said Mac, on his knees on top of a pile of wood. "I guess we can take the wood for Dan. He's got a wood-burning stove," he said to me by way of explanation. I started to help them to throw the wood out into a pile next to the dumpster.

When I reached the bottom of the pile of wood I found an enormous, ancient television set, its glass face still intact. It looked just like the one that my parents had bought in the seventies and placed proudly in their living room. "Hey, look at this!" I called the boys over. "I wonder if it still works."

"Even the ones that work don't work, man," said L.J. "The best thing to do with those old TVs is to just smash them to smithereens."

"Don't be rude, L.J.," Big Mac said. "Maybe the old man wants to try it out."

"No, honestly, I think I like L.J.'s idea," I said, making them both look at me with kind of a strange expression.

"Okay." The two of them smiled. "Well, all right, old man, death to the Tube, right? Let's go!" Big Mac lifted the thing out of the rubble and threw it onto the concrete next to the dumpster. Part of its glass face cracked but didn't come off. We all climbed out of the dumpster.

L.J. handed me one of the larger pieces of wood that we had thrown out- a big sturdy piece that looked like it had been part of a railing. "You do the honors," he said. I picked up the wood like a baseball bat and readied myself for the swing.

"Aaannnddd... GO!" L.J. cried. The wood smashed against the glass of the T.V., forming a little circle where the impact had been, like a windshield that's been hit by a bullet.

"Come on, old man, is that all you've got?"

I swung again, this time breaking the glass. Next I went for the cheap faux wood on the sides of the screen. It didn't give as easily as the glass. I swung again and again. When the T.V. was smashed to pieces, I paused to catch my breath.

"Well done, old man!" said Mac, trying to lead me away from it, back to the corner and the food. "Are you gonna be on cleanup crew today?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, panting.

"Thanks. You're a fucking saint, man."

"You two go ahead," I said, "I'm gonna have a few more whacks at this thing. It's good exercise, you know?" I did my best to smile. The boys shrugged and took off for the corner. I breathed in hard and picked up my piece of wood again. The T.V. was smashed; I wanted it to be unrecognizable. I swung again. Mac's words played themselves in my ears as I bashed again and again through the plastic and the glass.

you. are. a fucking. saint.

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#### A Date with Edward Herbert

By J.R. Parks

Edward Herbert ate his thumb, a thumb he'd had within a pie. The pie was colder than his apartment, though not as cold as the weather, which could have been debated, depending. His thumb was bulbous, gourdish and tough: it looked rather like a turnip, though not quite unlike a truffle. It was salty sweet, as turnips go, though bitter as a daisy. He wasn't entirely sure of this however, though he'd eaten one of those in his youth.

Edward's chins shook wildly, all dozen-teen or so. They were patched with graying stubble, some long some short, though all unkempt and soiled. If he had eagle's eyes he'd be able to see them tightly curled about the carpet, imbedded like the roots of tiny trees planted firmly in fields of shaggy Kentucky bluegrass. The record player skipped: *Ain't got a worry down in Verny*.

The knocker knocked and Edward scuffled out of bed, the sheets like chains, the floor like ice. His shoeless feet were swollen and smelled of fish and garlic powder. They were two enormous bass, the toes waggling as they strode, floundering as though Mr. Herbert hadn't control over them in the least. His belly pressed against the door as a lonely beady eye peered through the peep hole. There was a woman, elder, trim, toothless, though sporting, what Edward always suspected to be, two of the falsest breasts to be implanted in a human being. They could have been carved from cedar and still maintain the effect. In her arms she held a child, round, pink, and wailing like a banshee.

Knock. Knock. Edward tapped back. It was a jest of course, some modicum of humor; a pitiful attempt at flirtation with a woman, whose body had dwelled on the earth, undeniably, as long or longer than Imhotep. She was not amused in the least, rather, she was haunted, and her face twinged as she smiled emptily. The smile was ever so subtle, though still enough to crack the dried makeup on her face, as though large ravines and fissures had slid open by the work of some ungodly quake. She shifted in the doorway, her face distorted and corpulent as she peered into the miniature window hole; it was not unlike some trick mirror locked deep in the belly of some carnies' beat up ford.

Edward unlatched the door and the hinges stiffly creaked open. The battered exterior of the door shone lavender against the dim light in the hall.

The woman asked him to keep it down. She cursed him for waking the baby. And said some other things, and asked questions. The burble of her voice strung out in high and low tones, as his droopy sunken eyes, weighted by desire, fell upon her plastic chest. They were painted, he could see, like her face, but they were smooth and buoyant. He found himself beginning to tense as he closed the door on her- she was still chattering like an old crow.

Eight digits left; and a pinkie. He counted and swallowed. He tossed away the can of soup and opened another. He'd long disliked the taste of hot soup, or perhaps he simply didn't care. The gas had not been on for nearly a month. The crumbs of crackers amassed like a sandy shore on his belly, several boxes worth. And as he slurped up the remainder of the second can, he sniffled and cleared his throat. He pressed the red button on his recorder and sat a moment. He thought. And he waited.

He stood up and wobbled towards the windowsill. There was a plant there, long dead, a dried up shrub of some species he'd never know the name. He raised the recorder to his mouth, and peering out of the dusty blinds he said nothing. He looked down and examined the stagnant water in the watering can, then he sat back down, this time on the edge of his bed.

There was a pile of unopened mail and a large parcel wrapped tight with a white cord. On it he read his name: Mr. Edward Herbert. He lifted it up and put it back down, then lifted it again. The weight of it was heavy, though not unwieldy, yet still he could not lift it for long. He shook it near his ear like some child probing beneath a Christmas tree for a set of building blocks, or a pop gun. He listened to the rattling parts for some time, until at last his massive arm began to tremble and wobble like a gelatinous tendril. He dropped it on the bed and it bounced and shook a moment. He then devoured two middles, two fores, and a ring.

Lounging on his sofa, the constant cooing of pigeons kept the corpulent man sleepless. The little monsters never ceased to roost beneath the gutters that shaded his balcony. He despised the little things, as they fluttered and defecated, reproduced and again defecated. It was as though, that place, cluttered with old magazines and soggy card board boxes, had some otherworldly calling to them. Edward counted sheep for a while, but was unable to sleep.

Sheep counting was an interesting notion. He'd never once given it thought until that moment, when instead of sheep he decided to count pigeons. What was the purpose of sheep? He didn't know. He only knew that in the animal kingdom, on a scale of which he was unsure, sheep were very stupid. Pigeons were stupid too. He pondered and scratched under his belly, probing at an age-old scab that never healed. *One, two, three, four...* until at long last, he fell suddenly asleep. He dreamed of many odd and

curious things: of kingdoms, and candy, and soup. He was in a perfect state then. He could bend the dream to his will, and he could choose to devour what he wished: and that's a rare thing. He could dream himself strolling in pastures and fields; he could dream himself making love to whomever. He could dream himself flying, though falling was much easier, and he could dream in the dream until he'd died. Pigeons, he recalled, could damage the roofs of houses if not kept in check. And behold there stood a gargantuan bird, with a mane of white pluff vibrating at high speeds in the wind. Edward gasped and looked into the demoniac as it spoke in something not unlike Spanish or Portuguese. He chuckled, though petrified, he stood, a stone, steadfast but not in courage, more incapacitated. It pecked and probed and shat upon huge magazines with T.V. faces and breasts; and it nested in monolithic soggy boxes, where once bicycle parts or a swing set had been. Mr. Herbert heard his name, Mr. Edward Phillip Herbert. He replied but from that reply there came no reply. The telephone needed picking up.

He rose from the sofa and near the nightstand, next to an old can of soup, there rang an older telephone. He looked at it and lifted it to his ear. He could hear the shrill voice of a man on the other end. The man seemed as distant as though he were speaking from a dream. Edward didn't respond to his questions. He just listened, listened to see what the man may say. Trusting strangers can be stranger than trusting dreams, unless of course it's a stranger's dream, and that's a strange idea. The man raised his voice and rambled for a time, and Edward hung up.

The chimes of the cathedral droned on and on for a minute or so, and coupled with the skipping record, Edward Herbert found himself out of character. He was annoyed. He removed the record and placed his hands over his ears. They were moist and oily, and they slid back and forth, in strife he plucked them off and devoured them. They were delicious he noticed, seemingly brimming with the essence of thyme, but the greatest, the most breathtaking part was the silence. Edward could see the shaking front door, he could feel the vibrations of the knocker, *thwacking*, and *clacking*. He probed the door with his remaining fingers and peered out to see the putrid face. He couldn't hear himself tapping back, and after a few moments past before he left the door and crept into his bed.

The graying wrappers of ancient candy filled the sheets like the feathery down stuffing in a pillow, and as Edward Herbert slid his body in, innumerable wrinkled wax papers fell onto the floor. He glanced down, seeing the mounds and then laid his head back upon his pillow. On the ceiling water spots and cracks danced across the surface as he tugged the lamp light off. The shadowy figures made faces at him and he felt frightened briefly. His stomach rumbled as it did, and he passed wind. It made him

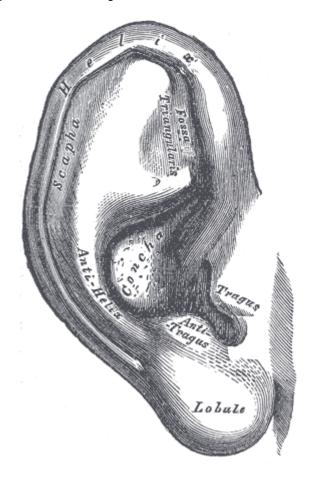
chuckle, but he couldn't hear it.

He opened a jar of Spanish olives and put them on his fingers, clumsily. He sucked each one off, finger and all, and swallowed them whole. The salty vinaigrette taste lingered metallic, and he belched. The scent was hideous and he felt ill so he ate his nose and shut his eyes tightly as he lay silent and distant. Springs coiled so tightly that, on occasion they would crook and buckle under his weight. It happened more frequently in the last few days and it seemed funny, if not a trifle sad. Edward looked at the ceiling, trying to listen to the springs, and he probed with uncanny effort beneath his enormous body to feel the springs but could not. He shifted, and shifted again, his movements playing tricks on the mind. Shadowy pigeons fluttered above him, feathers seaming to float all about him. He ate his eyes, not unlike the olives and he felt at peace again, in the darkness.

Salty sweet, vinegar pungent, metal mouth and brandy, finger licking New England grade, quail's eyes or monkey? He couldn't quite make out the rolling tongue within his chattering teeth, its tiny follicles-or something elsewere questioning his mind. He thought on it, for a few minutes, wondering what breast milk was like, and tried to remember, though there was no answer for that. It may be worms or something earthy, something vile sick or foul: this was an interesting feeling. Like licking blood from paper cuts, or tin can lids, or from a shirt or wrist band, these were all possibilities. It was more interesting than music, he decided; he was contented. Edward Phillip Herbert shivered and pulled phantom sheets filled with waxy butterflies, up to his portly neck. He tried to clean his teeth with his extraordinarily strong tongue, but it was little use. He managed to dislodge particles of something, plaque or crud or something, and he swallowed it down. He swallowed spittle over and again, but soon the spittle ran dry. So, Edward Herbert swallowed his tongue.

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# II. Integumentary



"It is in moments of illness that we are compelled to recognize that we live not alone but chained to a creature of a different kingdom, whole worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body."

- Marcel Proust

#### **Body Shop**

#### By Shaindel Beers

I've promised parts to other men a right arm in exchange for attention, a hand in marriage but I've decided to save you the good ones and cut away the rest – fifteen pounds of fat, keeping just enough to stay a woman. Slice the pale blue moons from under my eyes and leave you just the crystal orbs, unroot the tooth chipped on the roller coaster, the ones with enamel fillings, give you the others like pearls on a tray. Pop out the cyst from my imperfect hand, remove the right breast it has a birthmark and is smaller turn the rest of me inside out and serve it up all raspberry silk on a silver platter.

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## Synesthesia

By E. E. King

I am somewhere between Los Angeles and the land of make-believe.

I was driving back to L.A when I saw this prodigious rainbow, a rainbow that traveled, through all the myriad of light spectra between infrared and ultraviolet.

The weird thing is that I can see every hue, tone and light wave. Colors that are usually only visible to bees and birds are now obvious to me.

Pulling over, eyes on the rainbow I get out of the car, aware and completely alive, for what seems like the first time in my life.

Surrounded by mist, sun and that amazing rainbow, I yank off my shoes and stroll through the meadow. Like a butterfly, my feet taste the grasses, flowers and earth which are rich with fragrance, flavor and harmony.

RINGGGGGGGGGG ER RIGGGGGGGGG ER RINGGGGGGGGGG.

Startled out of sleep, remembered scents and sounds reverberating inside my head, I hit the alarm and lie for a moment, letting the sweet unremembered memory of the dream engulf me just one moment longer. I have been washed clean by last night's dream.

Then body involuntarily stretching, I lazily swing my legs over the bed.

The minute my feet touch the floor; I taste dust and dirt.

In unbelieving, horrified reflex I abruptly raise my feet, and the flavor fades.

I remain frozen, feet half-extended from my bed in an awkward pose, a mime poised on an invisible chair, brain whirling.

Cautiously I lower my feet and gingerly tap one toe to the floorboards.

Once again I taste dust.

My feet shoot up in alarm, suspended awkwardly.

Slowly I lower my legs, but I don't touch the floor.

My mind is reeling, churning thought and sensation with the random relentlessness of a dryer on spin cycle.

Reaching over, still careful to keep my feet elevated I wrap my fingers around the water glass by my bedside table.

I carefully set the glass on the floor.

Tentatively I touch toe to glass, feeling...no, *tasting* the smooth coolness of glass. My mind is numb, warily I dip my big toe tip into water. I taste the cool, flavorless liquid....

My eyes involuntarily rolled upward, as if they could look inside.

Was I still dreaming? Had my biology somehow been morphed by night imaginings?

Nonetheless, I still have to go to work, tasting feet or no tasting feet.

It is only in the movies where characters seemed to exist in a world uncontained by the confines of work. I resent those people.

I nervously lower my feet to the floor and walk over to my sock drawer, I have the decidedly unpleasant sensation that I am licking a path from bed to dresser.

"I really must mop," I think. Sensation drowning out amazement as it so often does.

Though running late, putting on socks is no an easy task.

Not only were there the array of rayon, cotton, wool and silk to sample, I discover that argyle tastes different than stripes and that solids present a more subtle, piquant flavor.

I finally settle on a rather bland yellowish, light rayon pair, slightly reminiscent of vanilla.

Shoes are the most horrible things! I feel as though I am enclosing delicate creatures inside hot airless catacombs.

I can't bear lacing them up, in haste I slip on some old open toed, leather huaraches and rush out the door.

I arrive at work 15 minuets late, hastily muttering incoherent somethings about traffic and accidents I settle into my cubicle and slip my feet under the desk, planning to doff the huaraches.

But Mickey Braggers, my supervisor, sees my yellow, open toed feet.

"So what's with the new look?" yaps Mickey, slapping me a tad too heartily on the back.

"You turning into a fag or something?" Mike guffaws. I hate Mickey.

"Uh... I have... uh... I have corns, bunions, very delicate, need to be covered, yet have air... Need..."

"But they don't need to be covered in *yellow* do they?"

Mickey punches me jovially on his arm, but his eyes narrow "Wouldn't do for clients to have... uh, suspicions, you know..."

"I-I'll wear dark tomorrow," I stutter.

"I... this came on suddenly, emergency you know... no clean socks..." I natter lamely.

"You need to get married, Boy-o," chuckles Mickey. Luckily, although

loutish and nasty, Mickey has the attention span of a retarded wombat; he has already lost interest in my yellow feet and wanders off.

Mickey has sprung from the pages of *Animal Farm*.

He appears to have undergone an imperfect metamorphosis from pig to man.

His skeleton is encased in a heavy suit of fat.

His eyes are tiny, watery and caked with gooey yellow. His nose is so upturned that it provides an unwelcome voyeuristic view into his nasal canals.

His skull is thinly covered by baby-fine golden down.

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For a week my feet taste... and then the sensation begins to fade away, at first it is almost imperceptible... but each day it lessens, until one day I awake, all flavor returned to my mouth.

I miss it, the joys of sampling a newly mowed lawn, the luxury of a hot, fragrant bubble bath, the softness of angora.

But there is nothing I can do... it has gone and left me.

That night I am driving home when I see this prodigious rainbow, a rainbow that travels through all the spectra between infrared and ultraviolet.

I pull over and get out of the car, in a meadow, aware and completely alive.

I am surrounded by mist, sun and that amazing rainbow.

The air is full of the scents of flowers, as well as something else. I can't tell you how I know, but plants being eaten by insects or birds send hormones through the air that attract predators, somehow I know that is what I smell. The air is heavy with the fragrance.

RINGGGGGGGGG ER RIGGGGGGGGG ER RINGGGGGGGGG.

I startle out of sleep and involuntarily sniff the air.

Scents waft through my window, some enticing some repellent.

I can smell hormones, pheromones, the distant sexual callings of moths; the musky signals of squirrels. Like a male squirrel, I can sense the females in heat for a mile around. Flowers are summoning fertilization or requesting protection.

Am I crazy?

That day at work is the first time I smell Mickey, the real Mickey, not the cloying cologne that covers his human/animal scent of oil, meats, gases and longings.

It is not a pleasant smell.

I identify all of my office mates by their aroma.

I discover myself privy to a myriad of secrets.

Ester Pidgin is menstruating. Sara Heyburn is almost always horny. Francis Gonzales is going through menopause. Gil Bishop has diabetes. Eric Bergamo drinks cough syrup covertly through out the day. Jack Alan, in spite of his newlywed status, isn't getting any and Mickey Braggers has Jose, the shy, skinny, dark errand boy, give him blow jobs in the stairwell.

I also smell myself, I like the smell. I fight an almost continual urge to leave scent markings wherever I can.

I take clandestine night runs, pausing to urinate in empty alleyways and unobserved avenues.

One night, while urinating behind a trash can in a park, I see this prodigious rainbow.

I am in a meadow.

The meadow is full of mists and moonlight producing, rainbows that ranged in color from red to infrared, from purple to bee purple (ultraviolet color that usually only bees can see) yellow to bee yellow. I see the light.

RINGGGGGGGGGG ER RIGGGGGGGGG ER RINGGGGGGGGGG.

I awake seeing shades I had never seen before and hues I had never imagined, for whom among us can picture an unknown color?

White flowers contain hitherto invisible markings and signs, the air radiates with iridescence.

It's amazing!

Colors hover in the air and there is no white.

White contains all, white is infinite.

White is a rainbow.

Returning to work, I cannot concentrate.

Mickey's meaty face, floats above the psychedelic button-down of his formerly white shirt front captures all my attention. I can not focus on, or even comprehend the meaningless drivel that leaks from his mouth.

And that night I watch the wall. I can no longer watch TV because it is too distracting. The wall contains refractions of light and color. The air is lazy with the cacophony of cicadas, the croaking of frogs and high reverberations and low tickling that usually only bats or dogs can hear, but I hear them, separate and clear.

I wake up on the couch. All my senses are going full blast. I am completely aware. Every breath has myriad scents, every step is a buffet. sounds and colors are infinite in variety and constancy.

I can't shut out the sound of plants growing, the smell of moth pheromones, the ultraviolet of white flowers or the taste of my socks.

I am exhausted; I can't even call in sick to work, because the

reverberations of the telephone are too painful.

At night I slink outside and clandestinely urinate on my fence, turning to sniff, I see the horrified face of my neighbor peering at me from his window.

Humiliated and embarrassed, I slink upstairs to my apartment, trying to overlook the fantasia kaleidoscope of colors screaming at me from the walls, attempting to ignore the incessant cacophony in the air, straining not to heed the myriad scents bombarding me, pretending not to taste the spicy salsa of my checkered socks.

I creep through the door, worn out with the effort to disregard the howling world. Obeying the cry of an unknown instinct I strip off my clothes, I just barley manage to suppress an almost overwhelming urge to pee on my hated shoes and crawl into my closet.

I have never felt so sick in my entire life, my insides are churning. They feel as if they were turning into fluid and whirling about. The closet is reeling; extremely nauseated I vomit, instead of the partly digested remains of some former meal, sticky white threads ooze from my mouth. I feel too awful to be shocked. Over and over my body heaves, regurgitating the sticky silk. I cling to the bar of the closet and driven by urges stronger than thought, I revolve.

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#### On Reflections and Flowers

By Rev. Brian Worley

1.

# The Girl Without a Face

"You know," said Rivkah, "in the grand scheme of things, all you can say about a person is that they woke up, ran a few errands, and then took a nap." A few glasses of wine were encouraging her to wax existential.

The Girl Without a Face was looking into her glass thoughtfully and picking at the hem of her skirt. She made a noncommittal sound.

"I mean, whether you're a little old lady in a small town or Alexander the Great, it all boils down to the same thing, doesn't it?" Rivkah gestured grandly with her glass, though the effect was somewhat spoiled by the fact that she was still slumped back in the chaise lounge.

"Hm," said the Girl Without a Face. She was thinking about her mother, who had died just less than a year previous. She may have looked up, toward Rivkah. "What about that saying, 'In a hundred years, it won't matter what kind of car you drove or how much money you had, but it will matter how you've raised your children.' How's that fit in?"

"Well, there is that," said Rivkah. "Though, technically, I'd say raising children counts as 'errands'."

"Hm," said the Girl Without a Face.

Her name was probably a misnomer, though it had been how she was known to the world. Perhaps her name had been Nancy, or Crystal, or Edith, or Jennifer, or any of a thousand other names. Whenever anyone mentioned her, the respondent would say, "Oh, the Girl Without a Face?"

She could see, and hear, and smell, and speak, but no one ever seemed to know what she looked like. When she was born, the doctor thought there was some profound birth defect and was preparing to send her for emergency surgery when she cried from her tiny invisible mouth. Since then, people could talk about her body, or her hairstyle, or her clothing, but never her face. To say that she had no face did not mean she had pink skin and misshapen slits through which viewed crooked eyes. It was as though, to everyone who looked at her, there was a blind spot that occupied the place between her hairline and her chin. X-rays showed normal skeletal structure, and from behind, no one would know that she didn't have a face.

Cameras were no help.

There were three people that the Girl Without a Face considered friends. The first was Rivkah Maccoby, with whom she drank wine (if it was evening) or cappuccinos (if it was earlier), and who she'd known since her second year of grad school. The second, Chairman Meow, was a cat whom she'd taken care of since her mother died. Narcissus, the third, had become a flower and had probably never existed at all.

The Girl's social life, until she graduated high school, could be summed up with people whispering about her while she was still in earshot. When she was still very young, she realized that no one could tell if she was crying as long as she was very, very quiet.

By college, however, she had endured the worst of the taunts, excused as they were because "children will be children". She had come out relatively unscarred, even if she had become something of a stoic. In college, she met people who, after an initial period of shock or confusion, were willing to accept her as she was.

Her life was still unusual, and though not all was bad, people tended to treat her like she was fragile or infirm. Even while the Girl was in graduate school, her mother would still call her, "just to make sure everything was all right," as though still unconvinced that she wouldn't fall victim to SIDS.

One day, after assuring her mother that she was feeling well and taking the multi-vitamin her mother had sent (although she wasn't), she told her mother that she had met a boy.

"What's he like?" her mother asked. Her mother hoped that the Taoists were right, and that the world was in balance, and that her daughter would meet some Boy without a Body to complement her daughter and show that the world was still a fair place. Though the Girl's mother couldn't quite place why, she always felt a little bit guilty after having these thoughts.

"Well, he's smart, and funny, and nice. He plays the violin, and he's studying pre-Med," the Girl told her, sipping tea and looking out her kitchen window, as she'd seen her mother do so many times when she was a child. She was looking at the yellow flowers in her neighbor's window. Even flowers have faces, she thought. "He's taking me to an expensive Italian restaurant on Saturday."

For the rest of the brief conversation, her mother tried to think of a polite way to ask, "Yes, but what does he look like?"

After her mother died, the Girl Without a Face inherited her mother's house. Before she moved in, she walked through the house with the ghosts of her parents and the memories of her childhood, throwing out and donating to charity and selling in a yard sale that Rivkah helped watch.

She stayed the night there alone, and found that the bathroom sink in

the master bedroom was stopped up, so that after she brushed her teeth, it took three hours before the drain emptied. It made her wonder why her mother hadn't fixed it, and she realized that her mother's life had largely become a mystery since she'd left for college. She knew her mother played bridge and gardened and worked for a few hours every week at a greenhouse, just to "get out". They chatted on Fridays, and visited several times a year. They went to the big family Christmas dinner together where all her cousins already had children of their own, and she and her mother felt a little uncomfortable. The Girl Without a Face felt her greatest connection to her mother, in fact, when they were feeling uncomfortable together at family reunions. But after she'd left for school, she could no longer know or imagine what her mother did to fill up all the lonely hours of the day.

Still thinking about her mother, the Girl went to the grocery store, purchased a bottle of drain-opener, and came back to the house. She poured the drain-opener in the standing water, then stood and watched as it slithered to the bottom of the sink and down the drain like some kind of invisible, faceless beast.

#### 2. Rivkah Maccoby

Most people thought that Rivkah Maccoby was vain, because she looked at herself in the mirror at every opportunity that presented itself. She had long, straight black hair, olive skin, and a full face. She was tidy and well-groomed, and paid great attention to detail.

She wanted to get plastic surgery, but couldn't decide which part of her body needed it most, and couldn't justify changing one part of her body when it would just serve to make the rest of her body look even worse.

Despite assertions from her female friends, and being lusted for by numerous men, she wouldn't be convinced that she didn't have a nose that was too long, hips that were too wide, hair that was too limp, breasts that were too small, and fingers that were crooked. She made love half-dressed and always with the lights off, and she could never quite enjoy it. Her relationships were usually short, and the Girl Without a Face accused her of sabotaging them.

The Girl once told her "Some men like women with smaller breasts."

To which Rivkah replied, "I saw a study that said men who like women with small breasts tend to be pedophiles."

Rivkah spend hundreds of dollars on skin softeners and body enhancers, cosmetics and brushes, files and scrapers and all manner of portable torture devices that she used every morning before allowing anyone to see her. When the Girl Without a Face saw Rivkah looking in the mirror, she indulged in a bit of black humor by imagining that Rivkah was checking to see if her own face was still there, to make sure facelessness wasn't catching. The Girl Without a Face thought that if Rivkah's aura of boundless, consummate insecurity expanded to the room she was in, the light bulbs would unscrew themselves.

#### 3. Chairman Meow

"Look," Rivkah said to the Girl. "Here comes your cat. He wants pizza, too."

The Girl looked where Rivkah had pointed to see Chairman Meow creeping slowly toward them. "Give me a piece of crust," she said. Rivkah tore off a piece and handed to the Girl, who held it out to Chairman Meow.

Chairman Meow was not a Communist. If the Girl Without a Face had a cat named Chairman Meow when she was still in high school, and any of the students had understood the pun of his namesake, the students would have used it as further ammunition against her. Chairman Meow was named "Tiger" when he belonged to the Girl's mother. The Girl Without a Face thought that was a terrible name for a cat, and she inherited the cat the same year she was taking a course in the History of Modern Asia; thus was Tiger rechristened.

Chairman Meow walked to the Girl and, while staying as safe a distance as he could manage, gingerly smelled at the pizza crust in her hand. Then he backed up and began surveying the room. "We shouldn't look at him," Rivkah said. "Maybe he'll eat the crust if you put it down and we turn the other way." The Girl Without a Face looked into her glass of water, trying to see the cat out of the corner of her eye.

After her mother died, but before she could move into her mother's house, the Girl Without a Face had to take Chairman Meow, née Tiger, to her apartment. For three weeks, Chairman Meow hid in the laundry room, behind the washer and dryer. The Girl put the litterbox next to the dryer, and food and water in the doorway. Every day, she would find the food gone and the litterbox soiled. She would clean the litterbox, refill the food and water dishes, and peek behind the washer, where she'd see a ball of gray and white fluff with glowing eyes staring at her in abject terror.

After a moment, Rivkah and the Girl heard a shuffling and turned to find the cat dragging away most of an entire pizza. They jumped in surprise, Chairman Meow dropped the pizza and ran away, and they laughed and laughed. The next day, the Girl found Chairman Meow sunning himself in the middle of the living room floor.

Chairman Meow was not a Communist. He wanted, so to speak, a

bigger piece of the pie.

The Girl Without a Face had always been partial to the cat because sometimes, as the cat was cleaning his paws, she got the impression that he was looking her in the eye.

#### 4. Narcissus

The Girl Without a Face believed she understood Narcissus better than most. She stands in her bathroom, washing her hands. The slowdraining sink fills with water. She knew that Rivkah would have suggested that Narcissus wasn't vain; perhaps as he looked at his reflection, he couldn't stop from listing all of his faults, over and over. Looking in the mirror, the Girl Without a Face knew the temptation of saying that perhaps he had only just seen his face for the first time, and couldn't stop looking at it for sheer fascination. But to her, that had much the same ring of falseness and naivety as her mother's idea that she might meet a man with an invisible body. Like the Girl Without a Face watching the drain cleaner slithering and creeping in her mother's bathroom sink, Narcissus is looking at something deeper in the water. She has heard that eyes are windows to the soul, and she thinks that perhaps you can see your own when you look at your reflection in a pool of water. Not just to admire it, but not just to list its flaws, either. To see past the skin, for all that is under the surface, whether it is green and growing or slithering and stagnant. The Girl Without a Face hopes that if she looks hard enough, she may become a flower.

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# **Billy Undergoes Some Changes**

By Daniel Euphrat

Later that afternoon, Billy noticed something unusual.

He called his doctor.

"Did you eat anything funny?" said the doctor.

"What could I possibly have eaten," said Billy, "that would make a nose grow out of my forehead?"

"Beats the hell out of me," said the doctor.

"Hmm," said Billy. "Well, thanks for the advice."

"No problem."

"The hell there isn't a problem!" said Billy, but at that point the doctor had already hung up the phone.

He poked the nose.

It twitched.

"Come on now, that's just unnatural," said Billy.

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He decided to go to the hardware store to buy himself a saw.

"Sweet Jesus!" said the girl at the counter. "There's a nose on your forehead."

"Hence," said Billy, "the saw."

"Well, that's no solution," said the girl, eyeing the brutal-looking handsaw with a slight grimace.

"Really? What solution is there to having a nose on one's forehead that doesn't involve a saw?"

"Look: if you saw off the nose, you'll just have a bloody hole in your forehead instead. Is that any better?"

Billy shrugged.

"There must be a better way to handle this," said the girl.

Billy sighed. "Just ring up the saw already," he said.

"I won't," said the girl.

"What?"

"I won't let you mutilate yourself like this. I refuse to sell you this saw."

"God damn it.... Look, whatever happened to 'the customer is always right?""

"Yeah, well, guess what? 'We reserve the right to refuse service to

anyone.' Just like the sign says. So I won't sell you this saw. Got it?"

Billy attempted to rub his forehead in agitation, but brushed against the nose in the process and recoiled in disgust. "Please?" he said.

"No."

"Well, what'd you suggest I do?" said Billy, near tears.

"Well, I wouldn't recommend crying," said the girl, "because snot will probably pour down your forehead. And that would be disgusting."

"Thanks for the tip," said Billy.

"No problem."

"The hell there isn't!" snapped Billy. "Now look. I am getting rid of this nose one way or another. Now, are you going to help me or not?"

"I won't 'help' you by selling you this ugly thing," she said, gesturing to the saw.

"Well, will you help me through some other means?"

The checkout girl raised an eyebrow. "I'm not entirely sure why I should."

"Because," Billy glared at her, "I already came up with one solution."

"One that involves taking a saw to your own face."

"And I haven't heard you suggest a better one."

"Maybe an extra nose on your forehead isn't a bad thing..."

Billy snorted. "Easy for you to say."

"Well, how do things smell?"

Billy closed his mouth and inhaled deeply. "Hmm..." he said. "I don't think I can breathe through it. Hell, it isn't even my nose! And it's on my forehead! Goddamn it, give me the saw!"

"No!" the check-out girl yanked the saw away from him and held it behind her back. "If it isn't your nose, than whose nose is it?"

"Beats the hell out of me," said Billy. "I just want to be rid of it."

"I still don't see why it's such a problem," said the check-out girl.

"Oh really? Would you sleep with a man with a nose on his forehead?"

The girl raised her other eyebrow. "Who says I would sleep with you under any circumstance?"

Billy looked hurt. "Hasn't this day been bad enough for me already? Do you really need to start throwing the insults around?"

"Okay, I'm sorry... I think... Look, I'm sure some girl out there would find you attractive with two noses."

"Oh right, because there are, after all, so many girls out there with nose fetishes."

"There must be some. How did we start talking about this anyway? Is that seriously the most important thing to you right now? How you'll attract women with a nose growing out of your forehead?"

"No. Most important is how I won't."

"Great."

"Look, this shouldn't be a discussion anyway. This should be a 'me giving you money and you giving me a saw'... thing."

"Wait... did this nose just appear suddenly?"

"Yeah, earlier this afternoon."

"Well, hey, maybe it'll just go away again."

"Why would that happen?"

"Why would it just appear in the first place? Why not? There's a chance, at least," the girl smiled at him reassuringly.

"Hmm," said Billy.

"Look," said the girl, "why don't you go home and sleep on it. Tomorrow, if it's still there, give me a call and we'll try to come up with something else."

"I think," said Billy, "if it's still there tomorrow, I'm going to buy a fucking saw."

"Okay, okay. But look, I'll give you my number anyway. And you have to call me to let me know how it turns out. Okay?"

"Okay," said Billy.

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Later that evening, he looked in the mirror one last time before going to bed.

"God damn you, nose," he said, speaking directly to the protrusion from his forehead. "God damn you to hell!"

The nose did not appear fazed.

Billy sighed and unzipped his fly for his before-bed piss.

And that was when he noticed something else unusual.

"I'm pretty sure," he said, "I used to only have one of those."

He called up the check-out girl.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hey. It's Billy."

"Billy?"

"The guy from the store?"

Silence.

"With the extra nose?" said Billy.

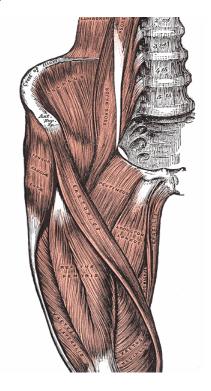
"Oh, that Billy. What're you doing? I thought you were going to wait until morning. Or is the nose already gone?"

"No, it's not gone," said Billy, "just... remember the whole 'you not sleeping with me' thing?"

"...yeah?"
"Well, there's been a new development..."

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# III. Muscular



"The function of muscle is to pull and not to push, except in the case of the genitals and the tongue."

– Leonardo da Vinci

## Re-creation

#### By Dianne Rees

In the room of Jane mistakes, all the Janes bubbling under glass. There's too-sad Jane, angry Jane, ugly Jane, and too-smart-for her-own-good Jane. Each swimming fishlike in the discard pools. Jane-in-progress on a slab, writhing, realizing what she is: Jane-not-good-enough. Future Jane, controlling, looking for Jane potentials—a little of this Jane, a little of that Jane, but still not right, not right.

Future Jane is a ghost and like all ghosts she has imperfect vision, a dodgy memory. She forgets she is each of the Jane mistakes erased and is still Jane-in-progress. Future Jane is uncertain how far she'll let Jane-in-progress go before she turns her into a Jane mistake.

Each Jane mistake that is discarded erodes future Jane. Each shedding renders her more featureless, more blunted. Soon she won't be able to hear anything but her own internal voice, her external ears all worn away; her eyes will be inverted, contemplating the internal navel of Janeness. Future Jane leans over Jane-in-progress to cast her off, to pull the plug, to send her into a vat of Jane forgetfulness, when Jane-in-progress, a.k.a. cannibal Jane, reaches up to bring future Jane to her breast, absorbing her into her own Jane-in-progress nowness. Standing up, unsteady, as the Jane mistakes moan and thrash in amniotic uncertainty — will they remain or be eaten next or simply disappear? - Jane-in-progress unblinks her present eyes, stretches hungry lips and opens wide.

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## Catch Me

By J. F. Peterson

"Go catch one, buddy." Deion smiled at Harry from atop the construction spider, chuckled and shook his head. A twist of hair escaped his hardhat and swung in front of his eyes. "Anyone needs it, it's you. And, brother, do you need it." His spider bobbed as he laughed in the seat.

Harry tried to ignore him. He stared at his sandwich and chewed. Peanut butter and jelly. He made it himself this morning. He went through his mental to-do list to keep from thinking about Deion's words: Food shopping. The med list for the pharmacist. Dinner. Changing his wife's bedpan. Her sponge bath. And that made him think of touching her, which brought him full circle to what Deion had been talking about.

Deion's spider crouched, bringing his grinning face close to Harry. "Don't shut me out. I know you need it, just like no one else. So what's it going to take? They got specials for us veterans."

Harry flinched. "Why you bothering me, Deion? Haven't you got a few tons of concrete to pour?"

Deion shook his head. "That's frustration talking, man."

"You're like a parrot, Deion. Cathouse, cathouse, cathouse. Got a brain in that head or a dick?" Harry bit off a chunk of sandwich and chewed.

"You should talk. Ahhhh." Deion leaned back with a big grin. "Just thinking about that palace of dee-light give me a good feeling, brother. You come with me. You just don't know when. They got anything you want there, anything. Upgrade yourself, find some sweet thing looking just—"

"Probably like you. Ugly as a stump." In truth, Deion was the handsome one of the pair, and both knew it. Harry returned from the war with scars no surgery had been able to repair. Inside and out.

Deion chuckled. "The ladies love me, even if you don't."

"Oh, I love you Deion. Just in very small doses. Time with you is like building up immunity to poison."

Deion shook his head. "Been poisoning you a long time then, brother." The spider heaved up from the ground, lifting his bulk on its spindly legs. "I go pour concrete now. Back to poison you later."

Harry tossed the remains of his sandwich into the trash. "Don't do me any favors." He walked back to his machines. The mantis stood, its two winches swinging on miniature crane arms, and followed Harry. The woodpecker waddled along behind, and the five multi-tooled newts scurried

after.

On the drive home, Harry passed The Cathouse. He always did. He told the car to slow. His gaze went to the building, a big restored Victorian with gingerbread siding. Cars filled the lot. Liquid paper shades shrouded the windows, showing images of females on the menu.

Not women. Something between human and feline, engineered to look human, but not really human at all. Genesculpted housecats.

Harry forced his eyes away.

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"I baked cookies."

Harry set the groceries down on the end of the coffee table without the broken leg. He stopped to straighten the embroidered runner. Mekelle had made it, one of her hobbies. He looked at Cheryl, the housekeeper and his wife's nurse. She wore a broad smile and a baking apron that read, "Kiss the Cook". Mekelle's baking apron. Mekelle hadn't worn it since the disease progressed to her legs.

"Hi, Cheryl. How is she?"

She untied the apron. "A good day, Harry. She's been asking for you. Sleeping now."

"The doctor's appointment? How'd it go?"

Cheryl's eyes dropped. The smile flinched, before returning in something that looked bright and happy and false. Fake it until you make it; he did the same thing. "I think she wrote something down. There on the dining room table. You look at it later. Go spend some time with her. I'm going home. But, remember, I got extra time later this week. I can cover if you'd like. I don't mind."

Harry forced his face into something vaguely resembling a smile. "You're a wonder, Cheryl. Thanks, but I'll be here."

Cheryl frowned as if she wanted to say something, but then she put her smile back on and nodded. "You're a good husband."

He remembered looking at The Cathouse, and the longing he had felt to be touched. A flush of shame ran through him, a warmth that rushed to his face and hands. "Thanks."

They hugged quickly before she left. He moved to the pile of mail on dining room table, stiff from work and old wounds. Bills, bills, and more bills. He didn't read the doctor's letter. Later. He went in to look at Mekelle.

Watching her sleep beneath the sheets, he couldn't see what the disease had done, not the withered legs or the weight lost. The shadows hid the rash across her face.

He imagined her vibrant as when they first met, before the war,

before the disease. He remembered running with her on the beach. Their honeymoon trip to Curacao. He stood a long while, lost in thought. She had been so beautiful. And the nights, the passion shared, he remembered that too. A lifetime ago. His body ached with wanting her, as she had been. In the darkness he imagined nothing had changed and reached out to touch her, but stopped himself. He let the illusion hold.

A rattling breath broke the spell. Mekelle coughed, wetly, and woke. She moaned. Harry sat and took her hand.

Mekelle's eyes fluttered open. "My h-h-husband." A faint smile creased her lips. "I m-m-missed you."

"I missed you too."

They shared about their days. He talked about the job, she about the doctor saying the disease had moved to her lungs, and that she would need a neuromuscular stimulation suit because soon she wouldn't be able to breathe on her own. He told her doctors don't know everything, gestured at himself to remind her what doctors had said about his chances after the war, and then helped her go to the bathroom, carrying her over and seeing what sheets had hidden: pipe cleaner legs, ribs and hips jutting out. He set her down on the toilet, wiped her after, and brought her back for a sponge bath. She weighed so little, small as the child they'd never managed to have.

He fed her the ground vegetables and protein supplements the doctors insisted would sustain her indefinitely. "Cheryl made cookies. I can get them. I'll soak them in milk so they're soft."

A hint of a smile creased the edges of Mekelle's lips. "No. Share them with Deion. I told Cheryl the recipe. The one you like. Gingerbread men."

Harry and Mekelle used to make them together. Afterward, one of them would always play the gingerbread man, yelling, "Catch me!" like in the old fairy tale, while the other gave chase.

He smiled. "Catch me."

She grinned, faintly.

He put his hand on her arm.

Over the years they had made gingerbread manger scenes together, Easter bunnies, mummies and vampires. Making something together had been the best part. He remembered the year before the disease started its work in Mekelle, when they had started making scenes of the two of them: gingerbread boys and girls for the family they had hoped to have.

It had been after one of those batches they got the call from the doctor. Mekelle had answered. She picked up the phone, talked quietly for a minute, then put down the phone and looked at the cookies a moment: A little gingerbread family spread across the kitchen table. With a sweep of her arm she sent them tumbling to the floor and started breaking them to pieces. That

had been the last time she made cookies.

Harry set a reader in front of her, perched on her lap against a pillow so it angled up toward her face. "Okay." He placed her hands on the controls.

"My loving husband." She smiled, but the smile slipped and she shook her head. "I'm such a burden."

"No." He stopped to swallow, his throat felt tight. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me." He sat on the chair next to the bed. Potpourris scented the room with flowers, but the faint ammonia smell never really went away. "You're my wife, and I love you. I love you. It's no different than what you did for me, back when."

After the war, when he had come back a mess of shredded tissue, she nursed him back to health. When the doctor said he would never walk again, she found another doctor who could fix him. When the painkillers became an addiction, she stayed with him through the abuse he screamed out at her. She had been there always, saved him in every physical and spiritual sense. She deserved all the love he could give and more.

Her hands dropped, as dramatic a gesture as she could make with her limited mobility. "I'm a sponge. An ugly worthless sponge. I don't know why you put up with me."

"No, you're beautiful."

She couldn't shout anymore, but the words came out in an angry hiss. "Don't l-l-lie to me!"

He held her hand between his. He remembered the beach, the sound of her laughter, the feel of her against him. In the dim light, behind the pocked skin, he saw her, not the withered shell, but Mekelle, his wife, his love. Beautiful. "I'm not lying." And he wasn't.

\*\*\*

"Harry, what you worried about? Cheating? It's not cheating. You stupid? You can't cheat without another woman."

Harry snorted and huddled under the tarp they had set up to keep off the rain. "Any other songs in that playlist, Deion? This one's getting tired." He bit off a chunk of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich and chewed.

"Had this filly last night. You would not believe. Got a download." He unrolled a reader to show Harry. Deion and what appeared to be a woman, both naked, moved passionately against each other on a bed.

Harry pushed it away. "Geez, keep it to yourself, Deion."

"I'm telling you, they feel better than real women. Better than suits, corticostims. Better—"

"Spare me the sales pitch, Deion. You like cats, I understand."

"Not cats, brother. Not some furry thing pooping in your shoes and

peeing on the carpet. Pussies. They made for us, brother. You wouldn't believe. Would not believe. Perfect. Hot. Women. And they want a man so bad, they climb right onto you. And the way they ride you, so tight and . . . Better than natural, any day. My girl last night, Tink, she ripping the clothes right off me, and, look. You tell me she don't look like the most beautiful woman." He held the reader out again.

Harry looked, curious in spite of himself. A drop of water hit and slid down the screen, scattering pixels into rainbows as it rolled.

Deion smiled and said, "They make them the way you want, you got the cash. And it's not a lot of cash. You pay, they can deliver in nine weeks. Nine weeks. You bring it home, raise it yourself. A year if you let them raise it. Look like anyone. Anyone."

The woman on the screen had a model's figure and blonde hair flowed around a face with a perky mouth. Wide, innocent eyes blinked up at him. Harry had expected cat's eyes, but those appeared human too, and a captivating shade of green. Nothing made him think she was anything other than a beautiful woman, a model or an actress maybe. The woman in the image smiled and her lips moved, as if speaking, before she tore her dress off and launched herself at Deion.

"Okay, Deion." Harry pushed the reader back. "I don't need highlight clips. She's beautiful, but she's still a cat."

"Pussy."

"Whatever."

Deion tucked the reader back in. A dump truck came by, letting off a new load of construction material, and the two of them waited for the sound to abate before talking again. Harry finished his sandwich.

Deion said, "What you got against it? You better than me or something?"

"I'm married and you're not." He showed Deion the picture of Mekelle on his keychain. "You go do what you want, but I've got a wife to go home to."

Deion wore a concerned expression. "For how long, Harry?" His spider moved closer to Harry, and Deion put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I known you and Mekelle a long time. You like my brother. The times you saved me in the Pak." He shook his head. "I do anything for you. You know. And I worried about you. What's it been? Two years? That sickness? That be the death of Mekelle and you. I tell you. Man needs a woman, goes crazy otherwise. You think you good for her like this?"

More than two years. Harry did not want this conversation. He'd had it with himself often enough, in the dark hours, when the want of his wife burned in him. A man needs a woman, or he starts to feel crazy. Harry knew.

But he did not want to think about it. He looked at the skeleton of the north tower. "I'm going to finish up the framing."

"You go frame. But you remember what we talked about. There's a pussy waiting for you."

\*\*\*

An accident slowed traffic. That didn't happen much, but there were still some self-driven vehicles that caused problems. Up the road, emergency lights flickered, and he turned away to look out the window.

The Cathouse glowed softly as the cars crawled past, like a cottage from a painting. A banner advertisement projected low along the lawn. Harry read it. Customization, what Deion had talked about, the words scrolled in the twilight air as leaves blew through them: Anything you want her to look like! Models! Actresses! Bring your images, we do the rest!

Harry thought of his wife, and her touch. In his mind he saw Mekelle on the beach again, young and healthy. Desire stirred in him, to hold and be held as he once had been. He thought of pictures he had of Mekelle.

His car suddenly accelerated, pulling away as the accident cleared. He turned to watch The Cathouse disappear behind.

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"You didn't decorate them." Cheryl shook her head as she stood beside the box filled with gingerbread cookies. "Or bring any to work."

Harry glanced at them, all lined up inside a translucent plastic box. Gingerbread men, all sizes. Cheryl must have used Mekelle's cutters, but she wasn't as good with them. He saw little tears at the edges. "No. I guess I forgot. Maybe another day."

"She wanted you to have them, you know. She doesn't want you to suffer. So you take these cookies, you hear me? You take them to work, because I don't need that wife of yours angry with me because you're forgetful."

"I'm tired, Cheryl. I'm sure you are too. Pack it up, I'll take it from here."

Cheryl had her hands on her hips. "You take those cookies tomorrow. Decorate them if you can. It'll make her happy."

"Goodnight, Cheryl."

She frowned a moment, then her face softened. She stepped to him and laid a hand on his cheek. Skin thinned by years rasped against his stubble. "She wants you to have some joy in your life, Harry. Don't you see that?"

Cheryl's hand felt small in Harry's as he removed it. "All my

happiness is in that room. Now go home, Cheryl. Please."

Mekelle's voice sounded in the other room, little more than a whisper, but loud enough to hear in the quiet house. "Harry?"

Harry turned, then glanced back at Cheryl. "Goodnight." He strode away to the bedroom. Mekelle's embroidery basket lay on the floor. She'd tried again, and her faltering fingers had failed her again.

"Goodnight," Cheryl said. She looked at the cookies, shook her head, then went to the door.

\*\*\*

"Shut up, Deion. Eat a damn cookie."

Deion chuckled and the spider leaned over so he could pluck another cookie from Harry's lunch bag. "True, though." He bit off a leg and spoke through the crumbs. "Four times. Never done that many times since my pup years."

"Your fulfillment gives me no end of satisfaction."

A frown stopped Deion's chewing. "You speaking Greek sometimes, Harry. Don't you want to hear about her? She had these tight—"

"No, Deion, I don't want to hear."

Deion waved his comment away. "You sit there eating cookies and—" He stooped to poke Harry's sandwich. "P-B-and-J sandwiches. And I know you'll be going home to that quiet house, spending the night looking at a woman who barely even talks anymore. You got no social life. No sex life. Let me help you. You give the word, I get one for you, try it out. Forget Mekelle a while."

"Shut up!" Harry found himself standing, looking up at the bigger man, fists balled. "Just shut up."

Deion tossed up his arms. "Or what, Harry? You gonna hit me? No, you gonna stand there and the world's gonna keep turning, and I'm gonna talk, and you're gonna suffer every minute she lies in that bed. And you not gonna do anything about it. Best thing you could do would be doing something. Doing anything. But you won't. And it gonna kill you."

Harry's pack rose from the construction yard at his mental call. The mantis held its arms high, winches dangling heavy and threatening hooks. The newts' drills and saws extracted and retracted. The woodpecker wobbled over and its steel jackhammer head bobbed in slow arcs.

"Shut up."

Deion shook his head. "You gone stupid, Harry. I got supervisor codes, shutdowns on all these machines." Harry's pack stopped in its tracks. "Even if I didn't, safeties keep them from doing anything. No, you doing nothing. Just like always, you doing nothing."

Harry took a step closer. "You forgetting our service years, Deion? Pride of the Pacific?" At his thought command, overrides and safeties broke. "I got ways with machines." The mantis stepped forward and a winch line swung, looping around the spider's leg and locking in place. The mantis set its legs and tugged gently.

The spider compensated, but Deion watched, mouth open in an expression of surprise. "What? My override's not — How you—"

"Just leave me alone, Deion." The woodpecker stepped close and banging a gouge into the spider's side.

Deion threw up his hands. "All right! All right. Okay, I stop." He shook his head and smiled. "You got anger issues, Harry. All that frustration."

The mantis jerked the leg and the spider clanged into the gravel. "Ah, Harry, look what you done."

Harry walked away. The mantis released the spider, and followed him, the other machines trailing after.

"That's right. You go back to work on the tower." The spider stood and Deion watched him go. "Maybe you do more than I thought. Happy Friday, Harry." Deion chuckled.

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A suited man stepped around the desk. "Are you a veteran, sir? I read the implant signature when you came in. Welcome to The Cathouse. Thank you for your service. I'll take him, Jenise." The man reached out to take Harry's hand.

Harry read the man's nametag. "Mr. Yuuwaku. You own this place? Thank-"

"Just Yuuwaku, please." He guided Harry to a small room, and gestured to a pair of Windsor chairs set beside a coffee table. A white runner lay across it, embroidered with flowers. On the runner sat a line of bottles, and a reader. The whole place gave the air of an old-fashioned home, but with a sweet unfamiliar scent, and noise cancelers peeking from the molding in places. "Please sit down. What's your name?"

"I'm Harry. Thank you, Yuuwaku." Harry sat. "You served?"

The man nodded. "Pakistan. Flyboy. Finished a couple tours, Hajan, Jaudar, the Quetta job. Got a taste for these ladies over there. Came home and started this place." He picked up the reader and poked at the controls. "Veterans receive their first session free of charge. Covers the interview, where we match your personality to our ladies—"

"Ladies. I like that a lot more than what people usually call them." Yuuwaku looked at him over the reader. "People give ugly names to

beautiful things."

"You still call this place The Cathouse."

"It's a popular term. It sells. But I don't like it."

Harry nodded and looked down at the table.

Yuuwaku set the reader in front of him. "Just answer a few questions, and I can get you started."

Harry picked up a corner of the runner and rubbed the fabric between his fingers. "Who made this?"

"One of our ladies, actually. They're not as dumb as people think. Quite clever, in their way. And affectionate. Very affectionate. They'll love you the way no one ever could."

"And what are these?" Harry picked up one of the small bottles. It held a pink liquid.

"Pheromones." Yuuwaku opened one and wafted it under Harry's nose. "Our ladies react to them. Without these, they're usually quite docile. Friendly, but not amorous. But with a few dabs, things change quickly."

The stuff smelled sweet, with hints of spice mingled in. Harry put it down. "What do I do?"

Yuumaku capped the bottle and prodded the reader to Harry. "Just go through the questionnaire. It's self-guided, it'll figure out what you want and let me know when you finish."

Harry answered questions, working mechanically. The reader interpreted his expressions and response times and answers. It finished with him after five minutes and Yuuwaku returned.

"Good. Thank you, Harry." He plucked up the reader. "We have two good candidates for you. Both new. Unused." He stopped at the sound of a footfall in the back of the room, and looked over his shoulder.

Two of them stood there. One wore an emerald green dress as brilliant as her amber eyes, a tight thing that hugged close to every curve. A pink chemise clung to the figure of another. Both were the kind of beauty dreams are made of, and both smiled at Harry. The one in green twirled a finger in her brown hair. "The one in green is Michelle. The other is Samantha."

Harry blinked, his consciousness stopped. But his body responded. He stood, stomach pulled in, hooking one hand through his belt.

The one in green took a step toward him, then looked down, bashful, glancing up at him from beneath lowered eyelashes. The other made a disapproving sound and stepped forward. Their body language sent a clear message to Harry, and he found himself stepping toward them for a better look. "They're beautiful." His throat had gone dry. "Beautiful."

Yuuwaku said something Harry didn't catch. The girls mewed sadly.

They frowned and left the room, but not before looking back over their shoulders at Harry. The one in green winked.

Harry slumped back into his chair. Their images hung in his mind, seeping in like water under a door.

Yuumaku clapped him on the shoulder. "So what do you think? If you don't like them, or you're interested in something else, we can customize to your needs. Your profile -"

"I have to go." Harry stared at the empty passage where the girls had been.

Yuumaku's surprise translated into a confused shrug. "Do you mean you'd like to take one home? That's fine, you'll just have to fill out some papers, and pay for her. We can have our shippers get her to your home by the end of the day. Probably within the hour."

Harry shook his head. "I shouldn't have come." He made his way to the door.

Yuumaku watched him go, smiling, as if he had seen this reaction before. As if he knew Harry would return.

Deion pulled in just as Harry reached the parking lot. "You finally made it, buddy." He looked at his watch. "Must have been fast. But, hey, I understand being impatient. I -"

Harry brushed past him to get into his car. His heart raced. The door smacked shut. "Take me home." The car started up, pulling out. Then Harry remembered. "No. Wait." The doctor's report had given him another list to fill. Medications, and the neuromuscular stimulation suit. Another attempt to stave off the inevitable. "Dr. Armitage's clinic." He buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry." The tears came then, leaking through his fingers. "Mekelle, I'm sorry."

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"It's a bad day for Mekelle, Harry. Trouble speaking. Real trouble. She doesn't say anything to me it's so bad. She's upset."

Harry laid his purchases on the couch. The suit weighed almost thirty pounds. It had taken more than an hour to get the right one, and then there'd been the long drive back from the clinic. "Thanks, Cheryl. You can go home." His stomach growled. He should have stopped for food.

She glanced at the suit. "What's that?"

"Neuromuscular suit. The doctor says it will help her breathing."

She nodded as if unsure whether or not to believe him. As if she thought he was a teenager buying stimsuits for some VR fantasy. "You got a package. A big package. Came just a little bit ago." She frowned. "I know what it is. And maybe it's what you need, Mister Harry. I don't know. I guess

I just don't know."

"Cheryl, I have no idea what you're talking about." He pulled his lunch bag from the pile and slouched toward the kitchen. "Look, it's been a long day. Please, I'll look into it later."

She shook her head. "Mekelle needs you, Harry."

He threw his lunch bag to the ground. The sandwich and cookies spilled out. "Don't you think I know that!" He pulled a sudden raspy breath. Shame and anger tightened his hands into fists. It felt as if something slippery and dark slid against his every thought. "Don't you think I know that?" He shook his head as if to shake away his feelings. "I'm going to see my wife, Cheryl." Harry turned away and closed his eyes.

Cheryl had stepped away from him, alarmed, eyes wide. "I'm sorry. I'll go." There came sounds of Cheryl getting her things together, the front door opening and closing.

The blackness behind his eyes became a well. Falling. No bottom. No end to it. Mekelle would die. He would care for her until the end, hoping for a cure, hoping all the medical stopgaps would buy enough time, but in his heart he knew eventually she would die. He could not save her. They both knew that.

He thought of Deion and The Cathouse and memories of the place again slithered through his thoughts. Especially the lady in the green dress. He imagined going there, night after night. Becoming little more than the sexual automatons they bred there, a little less human by the day. Maybe that would keep the pain away.

For a moment he forgot his wife, thinking of that place, that "lady". Then he imagined Mekelle and shame cut through the images. He grunted, opened his eyes and went to clean up the spilled contents of the lunch bag. He put it all on the kitchen counter, his eyes lingering on the unfrosted gingerbread men. Many had broken.

Mekelle lay in the dark of their bedroom, her reader toppled from her lap. A line of light from the kitchen slanted across her features and reflected off tears sliding down her face. He sat silent at her bedside, holding her hand. Neither spoke. Her eyes tracked to him. He wiped at her cheeks.

"I love you, Mekelle," he said. "I always will."

She made a sound, four sounds. They were not quite words, but he understood them: I love you, too.

He took her to the bathroom, cleaned her and tucked her into bed. They had dinner. It took a while, but he fit her into the suit and her breathing eased as probes sunk into the nerves in her chest. He held her hand and read to her from the reader until she fell asleep. He showered and curled up beside her. He forgot about the box Cheryl had mentioned.

A footstep cracked the hardwood floor outside the bedroom and Harry awoke, mentally commanding sensor reports from a pack of war machines left years behind on a distant Pakistani battlefield. He slid to the floor and crouched there, in the quiet seconds replacing battlefield instincts with fears of an intruder in his home.

He wiped sleep from his eyes. Mekelle lay sleeping. He withdrew a baseball bat from beneath the bed and stood. Once the movements would have been fluid. Now, old injuries stiffened by sleep made his motions jerky. Twinges of pain accompanied each step as he moved to the door of the bedroom.

He heard cardboard tear. Something crunched.

He had left the kitchen light on and a rectangle of light illuminated the empty hallway. The sounds of activity in there were unmistakable. And there on the floor, in the visible sliver of the kitchen, his lunch bag lay on the floor.

Harry stiffened and waited, planning his movements. Then he took three quick steps to the doorway. He swung the bat ahead of him with a flow of hip and wrist, his weight driving the aluminum shaft toward where the sound told him the intruder stood. He held up the stroke at the last moment. A girl in a tight green dress shied back with a startled cry.

Michelle, the lady from The Cathouse.

She stood barefoot and scared, half-crouched, eyes wide, his half-eaten sandwich in her mouth, something else in her hands. She blinked and ran.

Harry lowered the bat. He rubbed his eyes. His mind moved slowly, still clinging to sleep. A thought came to him. "Deion." He placed the bat on the counter, poured a cup of milk and padded after Michelle.

He found her at a large box set inside the back door, the plastic selfopening kind that collapses like a stretched Slinky when the tabs are pulled. He remembered Cheryl had told him about a big package, and knowing what it was. Now he knew too.

Neither Cheryl nor Michelle had pulled the tabs. It looked as if Michelle had ripped the ribs out from the inside and clawed her way out. The white walls flapped around where she'd torn it, and an envelope flopped at the edge of one of the rips. Michelle crouched inside, eyes peering out at him, finishing his sandwich. She made a soft sound, somewhere between "Meow?" and "Hello?"

"Hello." He stepped forward and held the mug of milk out.

She hung back, shivering a bit. It had gotten cold, but he didn't think that bothered her. She looked scared. She smelled the milk, though. She licked her perfect lips, looked at him, looked at the mug. He set it down in front of the hole, at his feet.

She appeared every bit as beautiful as she had at The Cathouse. Made to be beautiful, everything a man's body needed to be satisfied. She smiled and inched toward the mug, each move sensual in a way that sent a shiver through him.

Harry's hands curled and uncurled. He turned his head from her slowly, as if a great weight dragged at him. He found the envelope. It held a card stapled to a bundle of papers and a small package.

He opened the card. Deion's face smiled up at him and said, "Buddy, I thought maybe you'd appreciate this, after today. Yuuwaku said you liked her. Instructions inside, but he said she's toilet-trained and can take care of herself. You just give her food, and satisfy her other needs, to make her happy. That last may not be easy as you think. Enjoy it, Harry."

Harry closed the card. It came with instruction sheets and warranty information, and 24/7 service contact numbers. "Damn you, Deion."

She knelt at his feet, cupping the mug between her hands, lapping up the milk. She stopped to lick her lips and grin up at him before going back to the cup. She smelled of cinnamon and honey. His body responded to the submissive pose, the smell of her. Human or not, his body wanted her.

He reached touched the outermost dark strands of her hair. He held his hand there, looking down at her. His body and mind pulled in two directions: to her, and to Mekelle. He could never love this creature. Not in the meaningful way he loved his wife. But his body wanted the gratification of her, and fantasies of her warm touch fluttered through his thoughts.

Another smell came to him then. Faint, but there. Gingerbread. He let his eyes move from her beautiful face to her hands and saw the cookies clutched there. Gingerbread men, the ones from his lunch bag.

He thought of the children's story, of the gingerbread man cooked in the oven coming to life, and escaping its kitchen, only to be eaten by a wily fox. "Run, run, fast as you can, can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man. And here you are, the wily fox."

She bit the head off the gingerbread man in her hand.

"You didn't even need a stream to catch me. Catch him I mean."

She put one hand on his leg and rubbed her cheek up against his calf. "Prrt?" Amber eyes blinked up at him.

He ran his hand through her hair. It felt just as smooth as he had imagined. Did she brush herself? How could he groom her? He shook away the thoughts, and opened the package inside the envelope. It held the little

bottles of pheromones he'd seen at The Cathouse. One fell out and broke on the floor.

Michelle jumped at the crack of glass, then stopped and sniffed. She tilted her head up at him and purred. Her lips parted, just enough to reveal the pink tongue in her mouth. She stood. Her hand pressed against his boxers, then pulled at the fabric. Her hot palm pressed against him and wrapped itself around him.

Harry closed his eyes and stumbled back. Pleasure moved in a wave through him. Michelle followed, staying close, pressing against him. She dropped the cookie.

He heard it fall. In spite of himself, he blinked and looked past Michelle, even as she wrapped her arms around him and pressed her hips against him, hiking up her skirt. She wore nothing beneath.

Harry fixed his eyes on the cookie on the floor. She stepped on it and the limbs broke away from the crushed body.

The gingerbread man was him. His wife. Each broken, in their own ways. But his wife had found a way to put him back together again. She had found a way when there was no hope. She had not strayed from him.

He stepped back.

"Prrt prrt?" Michelle looked confused and tried to follow.

Harry put his hand up between them. He pushed her back into the crate. She stumbled inside with an unhappy sound. He put the mug in with her, and the remains of the cookies. He pulled the torn parts of the box shut and sealed it with packing tape. He called the 24-7 support number. Someone came within the hour to pick her up. He signed some papers, and she left. She was crying.

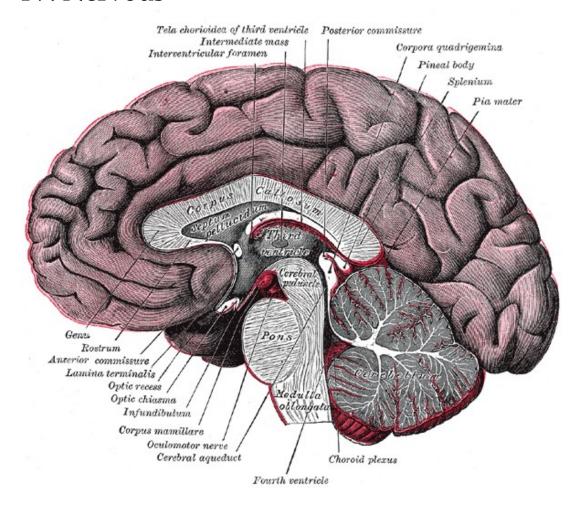
He cleaned up the broken cookies.

He returned to Mekelle and settled beside her. She had awakened from the noise. She tried to say something, but Harry couldn't make out the words. He took her hand in his and looked at her silently for a long while. Then, "Catch me," he said.

Her hand tightened around his, a gentle pressure returning his grip. Not strong. But enough. He held her until they both fell asleep.

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## IV. Nervous



"I am a brain, Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix."

 Sherlock Holmes in Arthur
 Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone"

# The Call Couldn't Be Completed As Dialed

By Bryon Howell

We talked on the phone again about your eating habits.

You told me you wish everyone would stop hounding you to eat.

Yet, it's been two days since you've eaten anything.

It's kind of scary when I stop to think your stomach is eating more than you are.

Mid-sentence, you hung up on me.

You never let me finish

what I was saying.

I was going to ask you that if beauty truly is only skin deep why the hell are you torturing what's on the inside?

Apparently, you're no longer eating

words either.

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#### **Shaded Love**

By James Maddox

I felt nauseated. I wasn't sure what to do, but that morning I woke up and found that my right index finger was black and nearly translucent, while the shadow on my bed sheets had flesh added to its corresponding hand. I calculated the chances that my shadow had a mind of its own, and that it was envious of my skin. Or maybe my body was confused about which part of it is supposed to be substantial and which part of it was supposed to be shadow.

I held out the shadowy index finger and put it to the sheets. Jarring as it looked, the thing could still feel, still touch, only its appearance had been altered. This problem had been popping up around the world. For a while now, nearly a decade, it was common occurrence to be sitting in the subway near shade skins, or shadies, or whatever you wanted to call it, but that still hadn't prepared me for the shock of becoming one. The truth hit hard: Now I was counted among those that had shadows where their normal appendages and parts should be, and vice versa.

You'd see news stories of the shadies pop up every once in a while, but the sensation of it disappeared years ago, and now it was regarded with the same amount of disgust that a cold sore might generate, which wasn't much at all.

No one ever got down to the bottom of things. And I guessed that the health hazards our government's scientists couldn't explain got tossed under a nearby rug, because after a week of looking to get myself back to normal, I had come up with nothing more than "Deal with it as best you can" solutions.

There were creams next to the medicated skin lotions that claimed to help. There were paints that did well to cover up the dark limbs, but that could only last for so long. The risk of the shadow spreading was high. I once saw a man with half his face missing. Through one side of his head, I saw the buildings behind him. On the sidewalk, the missing flesh looked up as it skidded on the pavement. I couldn't go through life like that, I thought to myself at the time.

"It's kind of neat," said Roger, holding my hand in his over the small table, peering at it like an inspector. All he needed was a magnifying glass. "I mean, it's just a finger."

Roger and I always found each other at the local coffee shop. Not

being bar people, we elected the Night Sky Café as our official dive, but I certainly could have gone for a drink that night. A strong one. A shot of whiskey followed by a shot of Jager; maybe that would do the trick after a few repetitions.

It's just a finger. Jesus.

If you asked me, I'd tell you that Roger had "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" playing in his head at any given moment. He had a kind word to say for every situation. The team that dropped the bomb at Hiroshima and then Nagasaki would have been glad to have him in attendance to put their minds at ease.

"But it's weird," I said. "I keep looking down at the table and seeing my finger on the surface, my *real* finger. I mean, why haven't businesses started installing ground lights that cast our shadows on the ceilings? This shit's unnerving."

"But it's not life threatening." I could have punched him. "Besides, look around. Two out of three people have the same thing going on. It's just something that happens nowadays."

"It hasn't happened to you," I said.

"Give it time." He sucked down what was left of a white mocha latte, the straw noisily slurping up the last drops.

The checkout counter was cluttered with knick knacks that had little to do with coffee. Little bears with swirled embroideries on their stomachs stared up at me as I went to pay, then, as I dropped my cash onto the counter's surface, I noticed an eyeball looking up at me. My hands shot up to my face immediately, I leaned over to look in the glass case set up next to the register where all the cakes and confectionaries were held. In the reflection of the glass everything looked in place.

"Sorry," a voice said from across the counter. "That's mine."

I looked back and saw that the woman taking my money was wearing sunglasses. She tugged them low onto her nose and let me get a look at what was behind them, which was nothing; a black hole where her left eye should have been.

"I keep telling them that they need to change the lighting in here, but nobody listens."

"I was just saying the exact same thing." I brightened. Her name tag read Stephanie. "When did the shade get you?"

"About a month ago." I let her see my finger. "Lucky," she said. "You got off easy."

And so friendships were made.

I didn't have an answer as to why I hadn't noticed Stephanie before that night, but after our initial meeting, our conversations grew longer and more complex. Sometimes we would bump into each other on the sidewalks and have more to say than your usual small talk. More often than not, those chance meetings ended with me following her to wherever she was going. To the library. To the bookstore. The girl loved reading, which worked out fine by me.

When I asked her out to dinner, it didn't come off as me asking her out on a date, which I had hoped it would, but rather it was just another place for us to accompany each other. Or maybe we were going out already. Nothing seemed official. It just felt like I met up with an old friend I hadn't seen in a very long time, and now we were picking up where we left off.

She kissed me first. I slept over at her apartment first. She bought me my first copy of Susan Sontag's *Death Kit*. I was the first to cook breakfast for the two of us. She was the first to point out that she always beat me at card games.

The shades eventually took more of her cheek, and after that she didn't like to be captured in photographs, since her sunglasses—not even the big ones—did little to cover up the missing sections of her face. Still, we were happy, and I figured out ways to aim a ray of light on her and fit the missing pieces back if only for a little while.

My patch of shadow never spread any further than my finger, and though Stephanie never said she resented me for it, I felt bad whenever the finger was noticed. Maybe I resented myself a bit. The same words were in my head constantly: *It's just a finger*.

Two years passed, and Roger called me early one morning and told me to turn the on television to the news.

An Asian man in a neutral toned suite and a red tie was speaking to a tight cluster of microphones: "...And we know that people have been suffering, emotionally, with this affliction so it adds to the discovery that much more. To know that we can help them is a great gift."

The superimposed banner set up by the news station said that they had cured the shades, and that treatments would be available to the general public within the next six months. I was paralyzed by the news, the telephone remained pinned between my shoulder and cheek, Roger was asking if I was watching, I couldn't answer, but when Stephanie walked into the room to ask what was going on, when she saw the news story and understood what it was saying, her arms wrapped tightly around me and I was able to breathe and think again.

It was a Japanese medical company that had discovered the treatment, and half of Japan had already demanded and received the medication. Each of them fully recovered, everything where it was supposed to be, skin with skin, shadow with shadow. It was starting too look like the shades would be

one of those things kids learned about in history classes, like the black plague or disco dance offs, but then the medication started producing effects that the scientists in their limited study spans hadn't had time to record.

Several cases emerged in the following months, each showing the same conclusions: The medication was only a temporary fix, and when the shades returned it took twice what it had taken to begin with. For those who experienced a continual loss of skin, the process was sped up at a doubled rate. And once you were gone, once there was nothing for the medication to use as a starting point to work with, it was all over.

Stephanie cried into her pillow for a long while after the news broke. We had been foolish to place all our hopes into one pile, maybe, but could you blame us?

The first woman to lose every piece of herself to the shades was a Japanese woman named Mayu Yoshimoto, but there were many to follow her. One by one, group by group, half the population of an entire country turned into shadows while their shadows gave the appearance of flesh, and there wasn't a thing anyone could do about it.

The people that were able to get their hands on the formula of the medication produced it here and sold it illegally to people who were desperate enough to take the risk. In a lot of cases, minute doses could be used to reclaim a person's appearance for a few hours without any harm being done to the user, but it was a gamble. People that had a reaction to the drug reacted quickly, and got the full range of consequences.

About a year and a half after the new cure had tanked, Stephanie didn't have the right part of her jaw. She quit her job at the Night Sky Café and stuck mainly to our apartment.

"I want to try the repair," she told me over dinner. "A friend of mine says she knows a guy that could get it."

I set my fork down and ran a hand through my hair. She had been hinting at this for weeks now. Finally, it was coming out.

"I'll only use it on special occasions. I promise."

"You know what it can do if your body mixes with it badly."

"Does it matter?" she said. "I'm going to be gone eventually, why not have a few months of happiness before it totally takes over?"

She had a point, I had to admit, so eventually, I broke down to the idea. We let her friend arrange the deal and soon we had ten small syringes of liquid that we had to keep refrigerated before use. Two days later, after a lot of hesitation, I saw her whole for the first time ever. She had a mole just under her eye that I never would have imagined. Seeing her like that was strange in the best possible way.

We started going out more. I have so many pictures, so many

recordings of us at the beach, at the park, at restaurants and bowling alleys and mini-golf courses. But they had their price, and it wasn't very long before I could watch the skin vanish from her face and be relocated to her shadow.

Then came the morning I woke up next to a body of darkness. I couldn't see her face, but I knew she was crying. I put my arms around her, held her tight, told her we were going to be fine. She just shook underneath me.

We tossed the remaining syringes of the repair in the trash. I'd never planned on using them, and now they were useless to Stephanie.

Weeks later, the CDC announced that they were running a series of tests that could help with the shades epidemic, and they were focusing a lot of their attention on those individuals that had undergone complete loss. I knew Stephanie would want to sign up, and when she said she was relocating to Atlanta, I didn't say anything to stop her. I just drove her to the bus station and kissed her on the forehead.

From time to time, I got postcards in the mail that let me know how things were going. I missed her like crazy, but I had hope that after it was all over, she'd be a happier person.

One day in mid December a postcard arrived and had "They got a foot" written in all capital letters and punctuated by seven exclamation points. I tacked the card on a bulletin board along with all the others and a picture of her taken during our repair days.

Then all communication dropped between us. I waited, expecting bad news, thinking she was taking time to word it properly, but then one day, she was at my door just as I was walking out for work. Her. Stephanie. Complete and without a shadow to blemish her skin.

"I had to sneak out," she said. "They haven't got it all figured out yet, and they don't want people in a panic like last time, so they are trying to keep it all hushed until they work out all the bugs, but I had to see you and tell you."

I called off work and we spent the day together in the next town away. We spent the night in a motel and woke up the next morning and showered together.

Returning home, there were five police cars in the parking lot. All their lights were off, but they were filled with officers. Stephanie kissed my shadowed finger before she got out of the car and flagged one of the officers down. She went with them in cuffs, but she tossed me a wink as they drove past.

Roger came over later to find me crying on my sofa. It had been hours since Stephanie had been taken away.

"You should have seen her," I said. "I should have taken pictures, but the time just went by so quickly." I thought about it for a moment. "Why didn't I take any pictures?"

We sat there a moment longer. A long silence had crept into the room.

"It was great to see her again," I said with a smile on my lips.

He smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said, and that was it. No optimistic words, no well-wishes or dreams, because he knew that I was already telling them to myself, that nothing he had to say could be more hopeful than what was already going through my mind. I'd see her again. Whole. I'd just have to watch the news for signs of her homecoming, like a lonely bride scouting the horizon for her adventuring sea captain.

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# When Everyone Comes To Your Birthday Party

By Bill Kte'pi

It was silly, the whole birthday party, friends driving down from Vermont and New York, some of them people Carl had always kept in touch with but for the last ten years had seen in person only at weddings and funerals. Even Matt and Brian were there, buddies from high school, the kind you fell out of touch with but re-found every three or four years and spent a drunken weekend with at the ballpark or someone's fishing cabin.

Everyone brought presents in boxes and wrapping paper. Becky passed out hats, lemon fried chicken—his favorite—and ice cream cake, in that order. There were thirty-four candles on the cake. He hadn't had a cake in years. He hadn't had a birthday party in even longer.

But he knew this wasn't really about his birthday—it was about his heart attack.

It'd been four years since he'd gone from a sharp pain in his chest to sprawling out in the grocery store parking lot, groggily aware of panic and concern and discomfort around him, four years since he'd spent a week under observation after surgery that "didn't go as swimmingly as we would have liked," and after his latest twice-yearly physical, he was finally where he was supposed to be. Cholesterol healthier than ninety percent of men his age. Forty pounds lost over four years, and the blood pressure of a teenage stallion.

He could do enough push-ups without stopping that he didn't know how many he could do, because he didn't need to push to the limit anymore.

He did crunches every morning, played tennis twice a week, and swam on Sunday afternoons before his weekly pizza with Becky at the checkered-tablecloth joint where they'd had their first date.

She'd never said, "Hey, for your birthday, let's invite all your friends to celebrate you not being dead," but that was pretty clearly what had happened. And—it had struck him, he'd written this in one of the journals he kept in an office where he never seemed to get anything done—he had known she was going to do it. There hadn't been any moment when the idea had struck him, or any doubt at all.

He'd known she was going to invite all his friends, he'd known Matt and Brian would be there, and he didn't think he had written it down, but he'd swear he'd known Brian would give him the Star Wars DVDs as a gift. Maybe he just knew them that well.

He lost himself in the party easily enough, catching up with everyone and sitting back and watching that curiousest of curious things: when your separate close friends, who've heard about each other for years but never met, meet each other. It'd been since college that he'd actually tried to introduce friends to each other—living in three different states since high school, and spending a semester abroad, he'd accumulated pockets of friends who, like oil and vinegar, would never find each other unless he emulsified them—and it was a very different thing now, with a whole house and yard for them to roam through, independent of him as a conduit.

Brian from high school and Sarah from graduate school had a mutual attraction he pursued too aggressively; Carl knew Sarah's marriage was tugging at its last frayed edges, but Brian always pushed too hard, and nothing was going to come of this. Jenna from Brookstone and Donna the junior-year girlfriend turned out to have a friend in common despite living five hundred miles apart. Matt and Sayid were both diehard Steelers fans with their own secret language and backlog of shared experience.

By eight, everyone was drunk on wine and beer and outside on the lawn dancing to "Push It."

Carl watched them, and smiled when smiled at, spoke when spoken to.

He would have bundled up the wrapping paper and thrown it away, but someone—Becky?—had beaten him to it. The dishes were done, too—where did they even get enough dishes to feed thirty-four people? And where had they gone?

"Thirty-four people?" Matt asked. He'd come in for another beer, apparently.

Carl didn't realize he'd spoken out loud. "That isn't right, is it? It's twenty-three people. Thirty-four years old."

Matt grinned and made an Alzheimer's joke or a senility joke, it didn't make much sense, and they made small talk about a movie they'd both recently seen where a renegade cop stopped a terrorist attack despite the corruption of his superiors, and rescued his daughter from the trunk of a sports car the terrorists had used to transport their bomb. Or something. It was very vivid for the duration of the conversation—wasn't the daughter the girl from those Pepsi commercials or something? And the terrorists had spoken in bad Eastern European accents—but as soon as they were done talking about it, he couldn't remember any of the details. Another haze.

"You all right, man?" Matt asked him.

Carl looked at his wine glass, wondering how much of it he had drunk.

He couldn't taste anything in his mouth, no residue, but—come to think of it—

"Matt," he asked. "How'd the wine taste?"

Matt shrugged. "I stuck to beer, man. You know I don't drink wine much."

Carl nodded. Sophomore year, they'd gotten drunk as shithouse whiskey on bottles of red wine Matt's parents had opened during a party but never finished — Matt had been as sick as Carl'd ever seen anyone, and hadn't touched wine since. "Right."

"Why?"

He shook his head. "I was thinking it tasted funny." I was thinking. I couldn't remember the last time I tasted anything. "Not important. How you doing these days?"

Matt shrugged. "You know. Working at the Fox affiliate doing the sports. It's not bad."

"Oh, yeah?" Carl had known that, right? "Just like you wanted, man. Excellent."

More small talk flowed around them, and at some point most people went home, or all of them did, and Carl sat in his office surrounded by legal pads and composition books, his journals. The door was locked—padlocked from the inside. Becky knew not to disturb him when he was in here.

He wasn't sure she knew that, exactly. He wasn't sure she knew he was in here at all.

"Birthday party," he wrote in the latest composition book. "Turned 34. Ice cream cake—Carvel? Do they sell that here?—Lemon-fried chicken like they had at the Italian place I worked at in high school. Everyone here. Everyone. All my friends from high school, college, grad school, work."

He flipped back through the books to jog his memory, and nodded. Work. Brookstone. He was an assistant sales manager at Brookstone, a mall store that sold cash-sinks like massage chairs, executive desk water fountains, and leather remote control cozies. "Mom and Dad weren't there, I don't think. I wonder if Becky will say they were if I ask her?"

He paused, lit a cigarette. This was the only place he smoked. The doctor didn't know about it, and his blood pressure seemed unaffected.

"I'm being paranoid again. I'm being paranoid again. I'm being." Carl stopped writing, and turned the page.

"I'm not dead," he wrote. "My heart attack didn't kill me. All of this is real. Becky is real. I have a job that pays my bills. I am studying to be a lawyer." After years of hemming and hawing, he'd started law school after his PhD in English. "I really should speak to someone about this."

My mother had me by Cesarean section, he'd written at some point, because she was afraid if she waited for me to be born naturally, I'd be born a Scorpio. I heard this story so many times when I was a kid, that I don't even know when I heard it first. My mother never read her horoscope or anything, not that I saw — she didn't seem especially interested in astrology. I don't know if she got out of it, or if she just hated Scorpios. Anyway, when I was twelve or thirteen, I became very fascinated with the idea that I was born when I "wasn't supposed to be." Like I was out of sync with the world somehow. Like I'd been born before my soul was completely ready for me. So three days after my birthday — three was an arbitrary number as good as two or four — I celebrated my "scorpion day," something I've done ever since.

The first time, I celebrated by smoking a couple of stolen cigarettes in the Stop 'n' Shop parking lot.

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"Hey," Becky said, poking her head into the living room, where he was sprawled on the couch and watching television. "Today's Scorpion Day, right?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I guess."

"This is what you're doing to celebrate? Watching golf?"

He shrugged, thought about pointing out that he was drinking the good beer, too, but didn't. "I don't know, I couldn't think of anything."

"Jesus Christ," she said, and she projected frustration but he could hear disgust behind it. "Carl."

"What, what?"

"You just had a birthday party with practically everyone you care about. What do you have to be depressed about? Nobody's sick. We don't have any money problems."

"I dunno." He didn't. "I don't think I'm depressed, exactly." He didn't. "Just—I don't know. Apathetic? Disinterested. Detached."

She pulled him up until he was sitting, and took the beer from him. It was cold still, sweaty with condensation, and she sat down in his lap, straddling him, cooling her brow with the bottle. "Is it our sex life?"

He started to say something, but didn't. It wasn't, but he knew she knew it wasn't and wasn't actually asking. Her hair was so red it was almost impossible to believe it was natural. She rubbed the cold beer bottle down her neck, and unbuttoned her top to brush it over her breasts, dampening her bra, her nipples making bumps behind the fabric.

He unzipped his pants, and she pulled her skirt out of the way, and he

sighed into her.

Soon, looking up at her, her hair making a collage of her face, her mouth moving wordlessly, he kept asking himself if she really looked familiar. If she really stayed the same. If she looked the same today as she had a year ago, or if she was a box with WIFE written on it, so that he'd always see her that way.

He loved her, but not actively.

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I feel terrible for thinking this, he'd written, but Becky is part of what makes me suspicious. I mean, she's just so... something. She fits in too well. She only argues with me about things I've argued about before or things I don't care about. She's a gorgeous redhead, and I'd never dated a redhead but always been attracted to them.

Do you see what I mean?

*She's a logical extension.* 

I'm not sure she's read any books I haven't. She doesn't quote any movies I don't know.

She's been places I haven't, and knows people I don't, but nothing she tells me about them is shocking. Nothing is new. It's all things I could have made up myself. Do I know for sure people in Florida have orange trees in their backyards? No. But couldn't I have guessed that?

Have we done anything new sexually? I can't remember. It's been three years we've been together – it's hard to remember sex with other people. And if I try too hard to recall specific encounters, I feel guilty.

How long have I felt like this?

How long have I felt this way about her?

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She put the legal pad down on the desk and looked at him with hurt all over her face. It was still Scorpion Day. He'd gone out to a strip club for lack of anything better he could think of – the stripper had writhed back and forth on his lap, his beer bottle in her hand and rubbing against her breasts –

No. No, that had been Becky. Before he went out. But the stripper had — had something. He was getting everything muddled again.

"I can't believe this is what you think of me," she said, Becky did, and he wondered which journal she had read. "That I'm, what, that I'm not real? Or not real enough for you? Too boring for you?"

"No, no." Yes. Sort of. "That's not how I meant it. I meant -" He sighed.

"What?"

"I meant, you know, when I had the heart attack."

She nodded, urging him on.

"Everything since. It's just felt. Hollow. Fake. Like going through the motions."

"Like me."

"It's just—it's not an insult—"

She laughed.

"It's because you're too good." That sounded lame. "Because you're what I would have wanted. How you look. Your voice, even. How we kiss, especially. The things we do. Everything I would have wanted. You let me do —you let me do anything."

"It's not letting you do anything," she said, and went off on a rant he barely heard, about lovemaking and cooperation and mutual respect and affection.

He just watched her talk.

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"What's so different?" she asked later.

"Things used to be newer," he said. "Or fresher. More out of the blue. Movies, I used to laugh harder. Or horror movies would scare me. Give me nightmares."

"You don't have nightmares."

"Not now."

"Since me?"

"Since then."

"What else?"

"Like Matt. He's doing everything I would have expected him to. And Brian. I'll bet he hooked up with Sarah and then got too clingy."

"I got an email from her yesterday, they hooked up."

"Just a matter of time till he's trying to move in, then, and she'll change her phone number."

She touched his neck. "How much of this is just cynicism?"

"How much of anything is?"

"Tell me more things."

"Music. It's all just more of the same now, isn't it? Just variations of everything. More cover songs. More remakes of movies, too. More TV shows based on movies, or sitcoms with people at work never getting work done, and couples who fight about everything but never really fight. Everyone's just coasting. The world's just coasting."

"And you really – I mean, from the sound of things in your journals –

Jesus, do you write in them every day? You really think you're dead?"
"I'm afraid I might be dead."

She nodded against his shoulder, and they fell asleep.

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She was sitting up in bed when he woke up, looking out the window at the other side of the bedroom, where the sun started to rise but the street lights hadn't turned off yet. Her arms were around her knees, and she looked thoughtful.

"Good morning," he said, and didn't know if they were still fighting. "We're not," she said.

"What?"

"We're not fighting."

He nodded. He could smell coffee downstairs and didn't know if she'd made it. "You've been up all night?"

"I guess," she said. "So, what, do you think this is Heaven, then? Us?" "Maybe everything. Maybe just us."

"But you think that's what it is. This is what comes after. This is Heaven."

He thought about it and shrugged. "I don't know. No matter how much I think about it, it can't seem to bother me. Heaven or Hell, dead or alive, I can't seem to get upset about it."

She looked at him, and looked older than he remembered her ever looking, and nodded after a long time, kissing his cheek. "Then I guess it must be." She got up out of bed, green silk robe offsetting her hair, and never brought it up again.

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# Freelanga

### By Jason Sanford

There's nothing a person can't do. Hike Olympus Mons without oxygen. Change the universe into something it'll never be. Outrun the things which won't be outrun.

I wake in the middle of the night, remembering myself even as I realize the mavich is coming for me. Beside me, my wife Lauren moans slightly and rolls over, taking the bed covers with her. I wish I could wake her. Wish I could tell her about hiking Olympus Mons without breathing gear, my body so pumped full of oxygen regeneration cells that I shook for the last week of the climb. Until now, I'd forgotten the accomplishment of being the first to do what has now become a commonplace thrill.

But as I lean over Lauren and brush back the lock of hair which always falls into her eyes, I don't tell her the good things I've done. Instead, I download a confession to horrible crimes. I beg her to believe that the man she fell in love with isn't the freelanga the histories curse. I also tell her not to waste time searching for me. My body morphs its very DNA and memories into a new life every time I run. If I can't remember who I am—if the mavich itself can barely find me—she'll have no chance.

I almost tell her I'll never forget her, but I don't want to lie. So I simply say she doesn't deserve this. That our fourteen years together were the best of my life. Of any of my lives.

Then I run.

As I leave our apartment for the pressure dome's artificial breezes, I expect the mavich to be waiting for me. Its claws and teeth stretching spacetime. Its body wrapping me into the perfect vengeance of its being. I remember what my brother Jerod once said, how nothing escapes the mavich. How once it scents your body and mind and soul, no amount of change will keep it from you.

I briefly wonder who among my millions of victims created this beast for me, but that doesn't matter. As I run for the dome's emergency escape pods, my last thought is of Jerod, wondering how far my brother got before his mavich merged their souls into its own special hell.

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Antarctica's freeze-dried desert burns my nostrils as I stand guard

over my buddies, who sleep double stacked in our platoon's pressure tent. I remember an old nature sim Lauren and I downloaded about these Antarctic rock valleys, where only a centimeter of snow falls each century. Now, as I actually breathe deep of the place, I realize the sim never captured the continent's true reality. I wish I could share this with Lauren. Then I remember that I'm now female. I wonder if that would bother Lauren, and realize with sadness that it would.

I sight my weapon along the horizon, looking for the mavich. My platoon and I are in a giant bowl of a valley rimmed by massive, ancient mountains. In the distance I see several human bodies—freelanga, created by me. I even recognize one of them and wonder how that particular SOB survived so long before being killed. Of course, in this freeze-dried desert the SOB could have died decades ago and still look freshkilled.

Even though my modified body wouldn't freeze unless colder than liquid nitrogen, I instinctively shiver for a moment. Through my link with my platoon, I feel their absolute trust in me. They'd never believe that I created the freelanga we've fought for the last decade.

As my body shivers yet again, this time because it knows the mavich is closing in, I remember Gunny Sam, shot three times while pulling me to safety after I was wounded. Or Cpl. Tasanee, who ran all night across the moon's surface to tell headquarters that our platoon was surrounded and our communications grid dead. She saved us and didn't double-think it, merely gave me a hug and whispered that us gals got to look out for the big dumb jocks. All the big dumb jocks laughed at that. After all, the only rule of combat is never let down the person beside you.

Dear God, please don't make me let them down.

I leave the perimeter for a moment and look in the tent. Gunny Sam, Cpl. Tasanee, all of them sleep soundly because of their trust of me. We've fought on a dozen worlds. We're closer than any family. I'm not going to do it, I tell my body. I'm not going to leave them to die. At least let me wake them.

But as I scan the horizon again, I see the mavich climbing down an icy mountain. Light bends around its teeth and claws. Inside its mouth I see the galaxy of stars, the last sight it gives before vengeance is created. I fight my body's leaving. Fight the urge to run and remake myself and forget yet again who I am.

But then, like before, I'm running. I jump into the platoon's shuttle and fly into the sky. I pray I haven't betrayed my platoon mates to their death. Pray the freelanga don't notice that no one's guarding the platoon until my buddies wake.

But the freelanga always look for the briefest sign of weakness. I

should know. I'm the SOB who created them. I'm the selfish SOB who programmed this damn freelanga body to keep running and changing and running.

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I lean back in my chair as Dr. Daniels drones on about the difficulties she's had in replicating the genomic vaccine. I nod even though I'm no longer listening to her words. Instead, I look out the window at the hospital's Martian gardens. I planted half the bioengineered pines out there. Many are now so big I can't reach around them. My little contribution to the planet's terrafarming efforts.

I stand and walk to the window, looking for the mavich. Dr. Daniels thinks nothing of this, assuming I'm deep in thought about the plague that's ripping through the Mars colony. What I'm really wondering, though, is why the mavich took almost fifty years to find me—and why it couldn't have waited just one more week.

As Dr. Daniels talks, I want to interrupt her. To ask if she ever studied the histories on the freelanga. Dr. Daniels is young, just out of medical school, so I doubt she's bothered to download the detailed story of my former people. How I created the modification which swept through the bodies of my true believers and turned brother against brother and brother into brother. How my freelanga murdered millions before people decided my teachings about the eternal mutability of self weren't worth killing for.

I turn and look at the sims which hover over the conference table. Images of disfigured woman and men. Kids with skin half burned away. The entire hospital has been focused on finding a cure to the out-of-control disease lashing its way through our population. In the last month we released two potential cures, only to see both fail.

That's when I see the mavich, walking slowly across the red-tinged desert, its light-distorting spider legs shooting out to rocks and boulders as it tracks me down for vengeance. I plead with it. Beg for more time. I've done good, you see. Helped people. Not enough to wipe out my debt, but I have the cure to this plague. It's in my head right now.

As I watch the mavich approach, I curse myself for not telling Dr. Daniels about the cure I'd worked out. After the hospital's last two disappointments, I hadn't wanted to raise anyone's hopes. But as I walk out of the conference room and my body tenses to run, I glance a final time at the pictures of the dying colonists. This is yet another sin I'll have to account for one day.

For the briefest of moments, I wonder if that's how mavich wants it. And then I run.

I'm breastfeeding my baby in the nursery when my body realizes the mavich is right outside the house. I protectively cradle Alis's sleepy body before logic says she'll be safer in her crib. As I lay her down, she sighs, content in being fed and being loved. I run my fingers through her curly black hair for a moment, then walk quickly to my bedroom.

Paul's stinger is in the drawer where he always keeps it. I remember how often I've asked him to get rid of the gun; how many times he repeated irritating clichés about the jungles of the old Russian tundra being a dangerous place. As I pull the stinger out, I bless Paul for his foresight. I glance at him sleeping in the bed and blow a kiss as I walk outside to confront the mavich, cursing with all my might the SOB I once was.

At first I don't see the beast, but then the trees shimmer and I realize it's standing right before me. I'm glad my body didn't detect the mavich until it was too late to run. While my body still aims to defend itself, I touch my love for Alis and Paul and realize I prefer death to running away yet again.

The mavich pads around me, its gaping mouth of space and time twinkling to a billion newly created stars. My body raises the stinger and fires, but the gun can't harm something which barely exists. I smile at my coming death. I remember my love for Lauren, my betrayal of my platoon, the thousands I could have saved on Mars, the millions more my original self killed because I was so in love with my own perverted ideals. Most of all, I feel my love for Alis and Paul. I don't care how hard my original self worked to save his life, it's not worth the pain I feel for those I continually leave behind.

The mavich steps toward me and from its gaping mouth I hear the cries of those I murdered so many years ago. I brace myself. Beg Alis to forgive me. Take comfort in knowing that Paul will love and raise our child.

But then the mavich pauses, flickers, the distortions which form its body fading for some reason. In that instant, I realize my body is going to run again, that it's going to reach Paul's jump bike behind the house. That my body will once again escape and change and create a new life, a life I'll only understand when I'm once again forced to abandon everyone and everything I've come to love.

However, even as I realize this my body's instinct to run misses a beat. I flick the stinger at my legs and fire, shattering bones and muscles. I fall screaming to the ground.

The pain is almost too much to bear, but I take pride in having stopped my body. I brace myself and stare up at the mavich as it reforms

even stronger than before. The beast opens its mouth impossibly wide, appears ready to envelope the entire world with its vengeance. I pray that Alis forgives me and close my eyes.

And open them again to find the mavich squatting before me, grinning. Kill me, I think. Give your creators the vengeance they told you to deliver. But the mavich merely sits there, grinning. It then steps back and disappears into the forest.

That's when I understand a mavich's true vengeance.

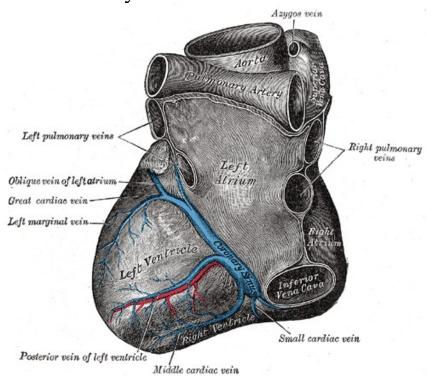
Paul runs outside and holds me, presses his hands onto my destroyed legs to slow the bleeding. He tells me a medical shuttle is on its way. They'll repair you in no time, he says.

I think of Alis sleeping soundly in her bedroom, and realize Paul is right. I'll be repaired in no time. And then my body will be running. And changing. And running again.

Thankfully, Paul believes it's merely the pain from my legs which makes me cry and cry and cry.

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# III. Circulatory



"What we feel and think and are is to a great extent determined by the state of our ductless glands and viscera."

- Aldous Huxley

### **Delicious**

by Kathie Giorgio

We were in the break room talking about nothing, when my co-worker said, "My daughter was dancing naked with marshmallows. My wife poked her head in the room and said, are you keeping an eye on Brittany? And I said, sure, she's in the other room with the Lion King video. I went in and there she was, no clothes, dancing around the room with a bag of marshmallows, throwing them all over the place."

Dancing naked with marshmallows. I was stunned. Imagine being able to fling off your clothes, grab a bag of marshmallows, and dance wildly around the room, marshmallows flying, body parts flying, mouth full of sweet sugar. No worries about if you were going one way and your breasts were going another, or if the saddlebags hanging around your middle were jiggling more merrily than the rest of you. Just freedom. Freedom and fresh air on skin, music in ears, sweet taste on the lips and tongue. Sweetness everywhere. White squishy oval snowflakes dotting the room.

Imagine.

I left the office imagining. I stopped at the A & P on the way home and bought a discount bag of marshmallows. Then I chided myself and pulled into the nearest ultra-mega neon-lighted superstore and stalked a bag of gourmet marshmallows. If I was going to dance naked with marshmallows, I was going to do it big.

Rapidly eating my supper, I felt my heart beating and a tingle in my skin. My body knew what my mind was thinking, and both mind and body were on edge, titillated, ready to go. I remembered when I used to feel like that almost all the time. Before a first date, sometimes before a second. Before canoeing, then whitewater rafting. Bungee jumping. All from when I was younger, and I thought, foolish. But maybe not.

I carefully closed my blinds, making sure that they went all the way down to the windowsills. Then I searched through my old tapes for dance music. I wanted disco, that mindless beat of my youth when I danced with abandon, just stomping my feet to the rhythm and thoughtlessly humming the words that made no sense. I found the perfect Donna Summer tape and turned it up full blast.

And then I did it. I tossed my clothes to the left and right as I strutted around the room. There was an artistry to my striptease and I admired it. My

shirt slouched over the arm of a chair and my pants sprawled spread-eagled on the sofa. My panties were draping the lamp while my socks hunkered down in two lumps by either heating vent.. I ripped open the bag of gourmet marshmallows and threw them, watching the white wads fly through the air and splat against wall, ceiling, and floor. I stuffed my mouth full as I danced, my feet in a barefoot clog against the carpet, and as I tasted the sugar, I wondered briefly about rugburn on my soles.

But it didn't matter. Before the first song was half over, I was winded. My knees shook. And dammit, my breasts did go one way while I went another, and I could feel my stomach doing a shimmy to a tango beat all its own.

Panting, I leaned against a wall. My living room was flecked with mashed marshmallow blobs and my clothes were thrown like the bodies of strangers in a bizarre car accident. The disco rhythm vibrated against the wall and it gave me a headache.

I turned the tape off. I cleaned the mess up.

Later, Barry Manilow warbled from my stereo and I sat in my recliner, safely wrapped in my favorite flannel nightshirt, the one with the pink and red stripes that was at once both soft and vibrant. As I dropped three surviving gourmet marshmallows into my mug of hot chocolate, I thought, Oh my God, it's come to this.

I'm old. Archaic, prehistoric, antique. Old. I cried into my mug.

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A week or so of hot chocolate and marshmallows later, I went out for a night on the town. My company threw a shindig of sorts with several of its sister companies. It was held at one of the city's largest ballrooms and as I swept out of my apartment in a tumble of taffeta and satin, I again thought longingly back to the days of ripped-knees blue jeans and fringed bare-belly tops. But still there was a swish to my walk that was lovely to hear and the cool evening breeze lapped at my neck, left bare beneath upswept hair to face the elements. Driving to the ball in my blue '87 Corolla instead of a pumpkin-shaped carriage lowered my spirits, but after I abandoned the car in the parking garage, I was able to revel in the swish and the air once again.

About halfway through the dance, after a dozen fox-trots with coworkers, including the father of the naked marshmallow dancer, a stranger led me out on the floor. He asked me to dance with a voice just barely above a whisper, so soft it made my ear tickle. The band played a waltz and I fit easily in his arms as we swayed across the floor. In my mind, I hummed the Onetwo-three-One-two-three and the hum must have brought my lips together in a smile, because he smiled back at me, open, admiring, delighted.

We were together for the rest of the night. Once, he even waltzed me completely off the dance floor and onto an outdoor balcony. Beneath the satin and taffeta with the soft music playing at my toes, my breasts and stomach reunited with the rest of my body and we all danced together, arms, legs, hips, torso, at one again, smooth, happy, lovely.

Tingling.

My partner continued smiling at me as if I was the only woman on this earth and we talked beneath a sappy full moon that left me weak in the knees. I let him kiss me and his fingers on my bare arms brought me back to throwing marshmallows, dancing naked. But now the marshmallows rose slowly from my open hands, they floated across the room and landed with soft gentle whispers against pillows and clouds and down-filled quilts left out in the sun to air. I tasted kiss-sweetness on my lips and then briefly, my tongue, and I felt myself melt into a jacuzzi of warm chocolate.

I let him kiss me again at the door of my apartment and I promised that I would call him in the morning. And I knew I would.

Later, dressed again in my pink and red striped nightshirt, cradling a mug of hot chocolate laced with plain grocery store marshmallows, I swayed to Lionel Richie crooning from my tape player. And I thought, so this is what it's come to.

I bit into a marshmallow and felt the sugar press, melt, and flow against the roof of my mouth and then down my throat in a slow lapping river of heat and richness. I said out loud, stickily, "So this is what it's come to. I am slow-dancing, sleepily, with marshmallows."

Then I nodded and settled back into my life like a recliner, wrapping my flannel arms around myself and breathing in the chocolate, drinking deep of the warmth and sweetness held by my own two hands, surrounded by the gentle rhythms of the softest music in the world.

Slow-dancing, sleepily, with marshmallows. This is what it's come to. Delicious.

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# Finally, a Husband Who Gets It

By Randall Brown

Let me begin by saying that it was six months since my wife and I had "known" each other. Things kept popping up—well, every thing except you know—things such as twisted knees, middle-of-the-night projects around the house, migraines, reactions to food additives. Random things. Things beyond our control—the forces of the world set against our making love. So it seemed. We were in our late thirties. Too early for a sexless marriage. Just fate pitted against us.

In the last drawer of her bedside table, while searching for my airline ticket for the week-long Wisconsin Beer & Cheese Fest with some old college buddies, there I spotted it. Marked with the one-stringed "Bookmark Thong," but I didn't crack a smile. On the cover a woman smiled back at me, her hand gripping her knee. Above her, in quotes, "Not Tonight Dear: 100 Proven Ways to Get Out of It."

I opened to the bookmark page. There were all one hundred, some highlighted, the forces of the world set against us. There they were, with their bright yellow smiles. Gotcha.

That night, after she finished the dishes, I was thinking of a number between 1 and 100. It turned out to be 38—not a particularly creative one.

"I'm going to bed early," Mel said in the calm, even tone talked about on page 76. "Right after I do my Pilates."

"Oh, why to bed so soon?" I asked her from the toilet, the door wide open so I could see what was up.

"I have an early morning meeting with a parent. Need to get up early to prepare. Early," she repeated at the end.

The Pilates machine was in the bedroom. I sat on the couch in the sitting room off the bedroom to watch SportsCenter, a difficult task considering all the grunting and moaning coming from the bedroom. I reached behind the sofa cushion to get my stash—only a half-filled bag of Cheetos was left.

At the commercial break, I got up to grab a drink from the bathroom faucet and slipped on the wet towel I had left on the floor after my post-work shower. As I lay there, I caught sight of myself in the mirror—Cheetos spilled on top of me, my gut hanging out, my face and fingers covered in the cheese-like residue.

Now I had a headache. Jeez. Okay. I was beginning to get it. Or

understand why I don't get it. It was the first week of January. A new year. A new you.

A few mornings later, Mel stared at the grapefruit on my plate. "Let me guess. They're creating bacon-flavored ones now."

"How 'bout a little support here?" I said. I picked up the grapefruit and squeezed the juice into my mouth.

"Support? For what? Eating fruit?"

"Well, yes. But bigger than that?"

"What's bigger than a grapefruit? Watermelon? Don't tell me watermelon's next?"

"Lifestyle changes. You've been sacrificing — giving up your waffles for that cardboard-tasting cereal. It isn't fair for me to eat a doughnut, now, is it?"

"Where do you eat doughnuts?"

"The doughnut's not the point. Me. I'm changing."

"By giving up your doughnuts? So that was that electricity in the air. Big changes over here, folks." She stood on the chair and pointed both index fingers at me. "My husband is now eating his first grapefruit in—how many years?"

"Hey. I thought you'd be happy."

"Oh, honey. I am happy. Deliriously so. Enjoy your grapefruit. Could you buy some duct tape on the way home? I have that project tonight to finish."

Crap. Number 72.

That night I came home with duct tape—and the catalog for the Sears home gym—delivery in 3 days.

"Hey look," Mel said. "It even has a beverage holder. Think it will hold your 16 ounce can?"

"My can's a little bigger than that," I said, shakin' my rump like some baboon in the jungle. Maybe I should paint my butt pink.

Mel at least smiled.

For the next month, I ate my grapefruit, my Ramen noodle lunch, my 1 serving dinner sans beer, chocolate cake, midnight cereal snack. And sometimes I even got my number – 26, need to work out – into the conversation before hers.

As I was coming up the basement stairs a few days before Valentine's Day, she stood there, arms crossed. Waiting.

"Who is it?" Mel asked.

"Me. Who do you think?"

"No. The affair. Who is it?"

"The cleaning woman. Petra. When she bends over to dust the

floorboards, that big 65-year-old Russian booty is too hard to resist. It just happened. Right there in the dining room."

"No. Really."

"It's you, Mel. You."

"Really? For me you've been doing this?"

She reached behind me and wrapped her arms around me. Before I could stop it, out came, "Not tonight, dear. It's number 15." A sore back.

She stopped. Took her arms back. Stared and thought. "You knew. You bum. You knew. And all this—it wasn't for me. It was just for sex, wasn't it?"

"Well, sex with you."

"You know what? This is perfect. No, really. I'll print up a calendar and write the numbers in for you in advance. Then I don't have to come up with these lame excuses for not sleeping with you. Just perfect. And pick up your goddamn towel after your shower."

She stomped up the stairs. I thought of something she said a while ago about the towel I once again left on the floor. It wasn't about the towel. I could give a shit about the towel. It's what the towel represents.

I had focused on only one lump I saw in that mirror—and ignored that lump of a towel in the middle of the bathroom floor. Therein was the answer—finding out what the towel represented.

When I got him from work that night, I decided to seek help.

"Your problem," Petra was telling me, "is that you thought only of the towel as a towel. You have to erase the towel from your thoughts."

She was a wise Russian cleaning woman. "And replace it with what?" "When you don't pick up your own towel, what do you make her?" "A towel picker-upper?"

Petra sighed. A heavy sigh. Ah men, the sigh said. Idiots, all of them. "No, Mr. Norton. Think about it. You know it isn't the towel."

"Yes, yes. I know. What the towel represents."

I stared at her dusting cloths on the table, thought of the wise old master from Karate Kid. Wax on; wax off. It looked like whacks off. Again.

"What are you doing?" Mel asked later that night. She must have been standing there for a while, watching me pick up and drop my towel over and over.

"The towel. I'm figuring out what it represents."

"Oh. Good luck."

I followed her into the bedroom. "Don't you miss us together at all?" I asked her. "I mean. Are you fine with us just being roommates? Maybe you could invite a girlfriend to live with us and I could change my name to Jack Tripper."

"He was gay," she said.

"No. He only pretended to be gay for the Ropers."

"Right, right," she said "Just like you're only pretending to care to have sex."

"I'm not pretending. It isn't the sex. It's what the sex represents."

"Don't tell me," she said. "The sex is the towel."

"No. Well, yes. The towel, to you, represents that I love you; the sex, for me, represents the same thing."

She handed me a towel from the pile of folded laundry on the bed. "I love you," she said.

I threw the towel back. "No mas, no mas. I surrender."

"It's that you knew," she said. "That's what makes it so impossible. You did this with one goal in mind—S, E, X."

"Not the sex itself. What it represents."

Mel thought about this – for about two seconds. "Okay. Let's just do it."

"Really?"

"Sure. I'll go get ready."

Minutes later, she returned wearing a transparent white gown.

"Oh my god," she said, "You folded the rest of the laundry?"

I now understood married foreplay — the folding, the cleaning, the picking up, the working out, the single serving.

Mel spun around in her gown. "I feel like a kid. Kind of naughty."

I jumped into the bed. Crack. My head smashed the headboard.

"That's not exactly the look I expected, " she said.

"I know. My head. I can't even move."

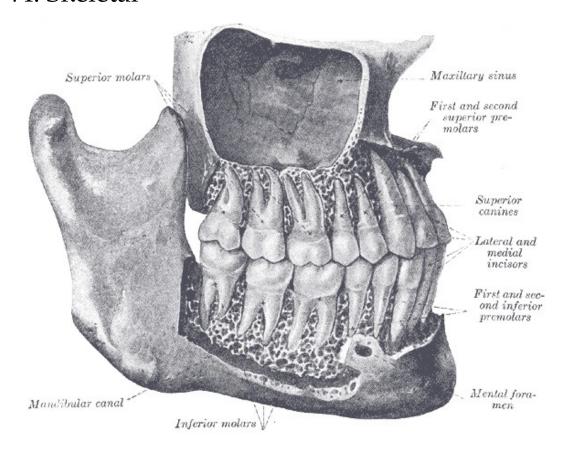
"I'll move," she said, climbing on top of me.

"Ow." And here it came, the words I never thought I would be saying, "Maybe now's not a good time. My head. It's throbbing."

She grabbed a pillow and hit me on the head, rolled over, her gown flying up, and #19 be damned, I rolled with her. After all, I'm a man. And it had been a long, long time.

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# VI. Skeletal



"My skull, my eyes, my nose three times, my jaw, my shoulder, my chest, two fingers, a knee, everything from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet." [Listing what body parts he has broken.]

-Jackie Chan

#### Xarms

### By Adicus Ryan Garton

Tobey sat in his julie, idling in the parking lot. His hand reached up unconsciously and started flipping through Dogstar radio stations. It was a nervous habit he had picked up in college, sitting out in his car, scanning through the radio stations before taking a test or breaking up with a girlfriend. Now, here he sat in his \$300K julie, idling in the parking lot.

*Junkrabbit*. No. Engineer rock. Too structured, weird time signatures. Tobey couldn't handle a 13/4 song right now.

*Septica*. No. If he wanted to hear kids screaming at him, he'd go home. *Putomundo...* 

Hmmm.

Tobey let the Spanish rock wash over him as he squeezed his eyes, trying to steel himself for what he had to do today.

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Two things you need to know before you read anything more. *First*, the virus. In the middle of the twenty-first century, we finally learned that we were not alone in the universe. The Kryllyrk visited us, numbering in the tens of thousands, landing simultaneously in the U.S., in China, in Japan, in France and Nigeria. They immediately sent ambassadors to countries in South America, the Middle East and Australia.

While there were many ramifications of this visit, the most significant was the virus they spread worldwide, now called Crazy K. It caused massive bone damage, heart failure, necrosis and insanity, among other maladies. It was completely unexpected, as the Kryllyrk had studied us for almost a century and the virus had never affected humans prior to their visit.

The pharmaceutical industry, realizing that the extinction of the human race was bad for business, set about finding a cure. Dr. Timothy Mallory discovered that the virus had mutated upon impact with a rare virus found only on certain species of mushrooms found only in Nicaragua, and this was the reason it had never bothered humans.

Leave it to Nicaragua to nearly destroy mankind.

Mallory and his team produced a cure, with a lofty price tag, refusing to sell to individuals but only to countries themselves. He became the richest man in the world. In disgust at man's avarice, the Kryllyrk left, rejecting Earth's entrance into a cosmic League of Civilizations, which had been their reason for coming in the first place.

Mallory created the world's first DNA-altering drug, and the pharmaceutical industry became the most powerful on Earth, eclipsing the fuel, food and even war industries.

*Second*, in the last twenty years or so, the pharmaceutical industry has come under fire for their inhumane, monopolistic and careless attitude toward their customers, and someone somewhere suggested that executives go under the knife (figuratively) to show the industry's sympathy.

Since the CEOs and the Board of Trustees were exempt from this rule, they okayed it.

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"Come on, people! We need some new ideas! Next month, GenRx is revealing their new product at P3, and we have to have something fresh to excite the market." This was their yearly speech from the boss, Ivanovich. These week-long brainstorms were responsible for some of the past five years greatest innovations in genetic pharmaceuticals: buzzcaps, a pill that allows humans to digest uncooked and spoiled foods; vizcaps, prescriptions vision corrective tablets; and last year's best-selling Bustcaps. "Mikey, you came up with the viral breast implant—what do you have for me, boy?"

Mikey shrugged.

"What about memory pills, boss?" asked Lark. "Like gingko biloba—but it actually works."

Ivanovich thought for a moment and then shook his head. "Nah. DEM's cornered the market for memory enhancement. There's no reason for a prescription memory supplement."

Pete nodded, grinning. From the day he had his digital eidetic memory installed, he never shut up about how amazing it was. Tobey wondered if he started remembering how amazing it was while thinking about how amazing it was if it might cause a feedback, making his head explode. With the words of Putomundo running through his head, he imagined the boardroom showered with pieces of Pete's brain.

"Tobey! What do you got?" asked the boss.

Tobey, imagining himself with C-cup breasts, shook his head.

"What about extra arms?" asked Melinda, who everyone in the office thought was a complete whore.

The boardroom got quiet. "What? What do you mean, extra arms?"

"Well, I was watching CNN the other day, and there's this Japanese doctor at Stanford with four arms, only two of them are robotic, and they looked clumsy as hell. I was thinking, what if we strapped two extra arms on

Tobey here?"

"Hmmm, that's a bit more permanent than I usually like. But it does intrigue me. Marketing?"

Jerry and Jennifer sat at the end of the table, listening quietly, their brains cross-referencing case studies and reference groups and market trends.

Jennifer spoke first, "Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, with only two legs."

Jerry followed with "Mozart wrote many sonatas, imagining he had four hands."

"Hum one, then, Jerry," said Ivanovich.

"Uh... boss, those are complex pieces."

"Would people know them?"

"Probably not."

"Then why would you suggest that? What are we, culture-mongers? No!" The boss turned to rest of the team. "Okay, then who's going to do it?" Looking around the room, Tobey saw men and women with genetically altered hair, eyes, faces, limbs, organs, cuticles, sex drives and more. There were a hundred alterations in a room with only a dozen people, and of those 12, only Tobey still had his original DNA. His thoughts turned to julie, the only person in the world who really paid him any attention, his kids who couldn't be pulled away from their antiPods if their lives (or his) depended on it, his wife and her methodical, biweekly love-making, and his hand raised.

Everyone turned to him, and Jennifer gasped.

"You sure about this, Tobes?" asked Jerry.

With a curd nod, he lowered his hand.

The boss looked around the room once more and started nodding. "Get cracking, guys. We have a month to give Tobey here four arms."

Tobey sighed as the rest of the executive team scrambled to talk to their guys, who would in turn talk to their guys, who would in turn make a pill that would alter Tobey's DNA, giving him four arms. "Shit," he muttered, feeling like his skin was too tight. There was no turning back now.

He never should have left his julie.

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He got inside his julie, and it sprung to life. "Good afternoon, Tobey. Are you off work early today?" Julie's voice was calm and friendly. There were five or six pre-programmed voice packages and he could download more off the net, but he had paid \$300K for this one, why would he want to go mess it up with some user-defined files. He didn't need his car speaking

to him like Robocop or whoever was playing the Terminator this decade.

"Yeah, Julie. I just learned that I'll be getting four arms from the boss." Julie was silent for a moment. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand. Would you care to rephrase that?"

"No, it's not important. Just take me home."

"You're the boss."

His julie's sonar monitored the area around the car, communicating with other cars' ADS to prevent any fender-benders or crashes. And since his car was more expensive, almost every other car's automated drive systems gave him right of way.

Tobey grabbed the steering wheel, which wasn't truly connected to the wheels in any way. Ten and two (and four and seven). "Oh, I think I'm going to be sick."

\*\*\*

The guys down in projection got the four-armed DNA in no time. A bunch of guys fooling around with the essence of life, and they couldn't be bothered to come to work in a suit and tie. Tobey interrupted one who was busy playing some ancient 2D viz game.

"Yeah, buddy?" asked the programmer, the smell of him terrible. Tobey had heard that these guys had weeks where they wouldn't go home and shower; they insisted on staying in the lab and working out kinks. This guy's black band t-shirt was wrinkled, faded and looked the way the homeless smelled.

"I'm not your buddy," Tobey spat out, trying to get the taste of sweat and hair out of his mouth and nose. "I'm Tobey Nakamura."

"Oh, the four-armed guy. I'm Zeppelin. What d'ya need?"

"I need you to show me what we're buying upstairs." Even though the lab was in a different building and not physically under anyone in charge, management psychology dictated that Tobey talk down to anyone under him.

"Alright, follow me." Together, Tobey and Zeppelin walked into the demo room. Tobey had been in here many times before. It could project a 3D hologram of a life-sized human, his different systems, zoom in and out, all sorts of expensive tricks. Zeppelin fired up the projector and Tobey saw a naked him standing in front of him. They got every roll of fat, every scar, every wrinkle—projection was not a kind business.

"Okay, I won't bother with the nervous system, because that was basically a cut-and-paste job. We hired in some osteo... bone guys, and they redesigned your skeletal system. Check this out." He grabbed the hologram with both hands and did something with his fingers, stripping Tobey of his

skin and musculature until there was nothing left but bones. "They had to redesign your ribcage." One flick of the wrists and Tobey had two sets of arm bones where before he only had one. His ribcage looked sick and twisted. "I know what you're thinking, but those osteo... bone guys, they made it all work. Your new arms'll work just as well as your old ones, and despite your freakish ribcage, it shouldn't be too uncomfortable."

Tobey stared at Zeppelin who just shrugged. "You see, this is why I got into computers," he said. "Nobody'll ever tell me I need to grow two wieners or twenty toes."

And I drive a \$300K julie while you probably drive a Prius, you smelly hippie.

Tobey left the projection department and leaned against a pillar outside. *Keep crawling like a caterpillar and they'll try to make you into a butterfly.* He realized that at the meeting, he should've asked for wings, too.

\*\*\*

"Dad! Dad!" Jody screamed. "Mario has my antiPod! And he won't give it back!"

"Give it back, Mario!" Tobey shouted half-heartedly, spooning flavorless bran flakes into his mouth. The dietitian had give him his new diet yesterday, one he had to follow to the letter until the genetic resequencing could take place.

"It's not hers, Dad! It's mine!" shouted his son. They used him as a conduit to scream at themselves. If he interjected, they would take their argument elsewhere. He didn't have to work in projection to figure that out.

"Nuh-uh! He lost his at school!"

"That's not true, you liar!"

"Yes, it is! Ow!"

Their argument delineated into squeals and screams, and Tobey tried to drown it out by crunching his flakes louder, his mind weighing the price of an antiPod against peace and quiet.

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Later that morning, Tobey took a 20 minute T-rail from Boston to San Fran, where he had an appointment with Dr. Tonaka, who that crusty Zeppelin had kept calling Doc Ock. "Please," said Tonaka's receptionist with the slightest hint of an Asian accent. "Dr. Tonaka will see you now." Tobey entered the man's office, or what he thought was the man's office. It looked more like a warehouse for old electronic components and computer hardware. Tonaka sat behind a desk, wearing a mad scientist's lab coat, spattered with what looked like blood. The Japanese man even had it on his

hands and face. Tobey's shock must have been apparent because Tonaka's brow furrowed and then an easy smile cross his face.

Without rising, he said a string of Japanese words that Tobey only vaguely recognized, being fourth-gen Japanese-American. When Tobey didn't reply, the doctor smiled and said, "Come in, come in, Mr. Nakamura. No need to worry about this—it's just lubricating oil for the extra arms. The xarms, some of my first-year grad students call them."

There was no sign of the xarms. Tonaka then stood as Tobey approached, and the xarms came out from under the desk, where they furiously manipulated a Rubik's cube. Tonaka wiped some of the oil from his hands with a rag, then offered his hand, his real hand, and Tobey shook it with unease. "The Rubik's cube, the 5X5 one, is part of a computerized calibration they have to run through every morning after lubrication.

The xarms looked like high-end prosthetics with the exception of the fingers, which were a nightmarish mesh of fibers, gears and servos. They were pretty noisy as they spun, flipped and twisted the large red, blue and yellow cube.

"Come, sit. I was asked by your director to give a quick rundown of the mental processes required to manipulate extra limbs. Tonaka sat behind his desk, his xarms hiding once more. "Your brain isn't wired for six limbs. For millions of years now, your evolutionary path has been crawled by things with four. But before that, when we were but insects...," here he snapped his fingers—his real fingers—and continued, "That insect mind still exists in ours as a couple of letters in our DNA. That was one of Mallory's lesser celebrated findings when he finally busted the human genome to create K-caps. People just don't like to think that the monkey is still up here." Tonaka tapped his head with a real index finger. "In order to operate those two extra limbs independently, you have to tap into that insect mind. Otherwise, your new limbs will simply mirror what the ones above them do."

Tobey stared at the doctor. "So how do I 'tap into my insect mind'?"
One of Tonaka's xarms opened a drawer and pulled out a pill case.
Gently, the xarm (the xhand? the xand?) laid it on the desk. "These puppies right here. I had them specially designed for the task. By your company actually." Then the doctor pulled out of his desk, of all things, a prescription pad. "Got my M.D. from John Hopkins in '97. I'll write you a scrip."

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The drugs made Tobey dream. Dream, I say, because nightmare cannot be a verb.

One morning, when Tobey Nakamura woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible insect. To be specific, he was a bumblebee. <u>Bzzz</u>, he said to the world.

His family was not so horrified, though his son and daughter thought for a moment that the bumblebee had eaten their father. His wife wondered aloud if she might still collect his life insurance or whether she'd be forced back to her old job as an accountant's assistant. Either way, she said with a sigh, their standard of living would have to come down.

When his children returned from school, they found him hovering over the trash, trying to suck the remains out of their soda bottles. After that, they kept his trapped in his office, where he constantly tried to escape through the closed window. It was almost impossible for him to see glass.

Then, during his meal of sweet, sweet corn syrup, his children had another fight about their antiPods, one which culminated with the antiPod flying through the air and wounding his back. He cried out, the stream of sound coming from his mouth unintelligible.

He lay on the floor, unable to bend his crooked wings, twitching as their fight carried them out of the room, their broken, bug father forgotten and alone.

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With a twitch of his backside, Tobey awoke next to his wife. He blinked the dream away. They'd been coming less frequently but were always similar. He'd dreamed himself as a giant grasshopper, a cockroach, a silkworm and most disturbingly as a wasp. In that dream, he hadn't any sense of empathy or mercy, and his stinger, as larger as his forearm, had relentlessly stung his family and friends. He shuddered at the thought of that nightmare.

He crawled out of bed, *for the last time*, he thought, *with but two arms*. Today, his genetic resequencing began. They would mold his DNA like clay and pump him full of regenerative drugs until his body got the hint and grew itself another couple of arms.

After a shower, he ate his bran flakes, listening for his children's first argument of the morning. They seemed oblivious to his inner turmoil, content to argue and pinch each other. His wife took them to school, leaving him last and alone in the house. He listened to the ominous silence, wondering what he had done to deserve such a lovely family.

They knew the risks that he faced being an executive, but they didn't have to act so casual about it.

He put the bran flakes on the top shelf of the cabinet and shuddered at

the idea that the next time, he might be using a new set of hands to do it.

He left the house and called julie out of the underground garage. "Where to, boss?" she asked, somewhat playful, because that's what he had wanted in a car's personality. She knew damned well where.

"Work, julie. And after I go in, come back home. I won't need you for a week or so."

"Sure thing, Tobey," she said, sensing that joviality was not in her best interests. She dropped him off without saying a word and went home.

Tobey went inside, where Ivanovich and a bunch of other execs accompanied him to the research wing. They took his clothing, measured him one final time, interrogated him about his eating habits, his exercise habits, his sexual habits, and finally, one doctor said as he placed a neuro-dampener on either temple, "Close your eyes, and this will be over sooner than you think."

Bullsh

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No dreams. No nightmares. No out-of-body experiences. No insect body experiences.

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Tobey awoke three times before the sight of his xarms stopped forcing him into unconsciousness. Finally, he opened his eyes, groaned, expecting the blackness but found only the harsh glare of the overhead lights in his room. Doctors swarmed over him, checking stats, adjusting machines. They didn't seem to notice or care that he was awake. When one leaned over him, he reached with all four hands and grabbed his white coat. "Give me some water, please."

The doctor smiled from ear to ear. "Just a moment, Dr. Nakamura, let me just... I'll be back in a second with a glass of water."

The doctors slowly filtered out of the room. Tobey found himself wanting to go with them. Ivanovich returned with a bottle of mineral water from a vending machine.

"I heard you wanted some water."

"Where's the doctor? Are you sure I can drink that?" He paused for a moment. "Could you put a packet of sugar in there and shake it up first?"

"Nope. That four-armed guy from Stanford said that you'd probably be asking for sugar water for a month or so. The doctors said that would interfere with your IV." Ivanovich motioned to the bag hanging over Tobey's head.

"Fine, hand it here." Ivanovich held it out but wouldn't give it to

Tobey until he reached out with one of his new hands to get it. "How do they feel?"

"Like arms."

"Do they hurt?"

"No." Why would they hurt? They were a part of his body now. He downed the bottled mineral water and then handed the empty back to Ivanovich. "Did it work? I mean, did you get all the information you need to make more?"

"Oh, yes. Smashing success, Nakamura. We're sure to have the spotlight at P3. You rest now."

His boss left the room, and Tobey looked at his new arms, turning his hands back and forth.

\*\*\*

At P3, fighting down the bile and acid churning in his gut, Tobey watched the commercial unveil on the monitor backstage.

Mozart's Turkish Rondo plays as Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man comes into focus. Two of the legs fade away, leaving only the wild-haired figure with four arms. Xarmcaps, the caption at the bottom of the screen says, When life throws more at you than two hands can handle.

The commercial continued, but Tobey looked away, groaning at the obvious parody of the old sunflowers-and-cloudy-day approach of selling Rx. The seamless CG-created four-armed doctor aligned x-rays while fixing an IV and adjusting a heart-rate machine. The four-armed mom spoon-fed her infant while pouring a bowl of cereal for two screaming brats, and read a novel with her last free hand. The four-armed musician played keyboards with one hand, guitar with two others and screamed into a mic held by his last free hand.

The last shot was a keyboard playing Mozart's Rondo with one hand, then two, three, and finally all four hands playing in harmony. *Xarmcaps* – *Do more* the screen read as the keyboard image faded to black.

Mozart reminded Tobey of his kids. He'd tried to get Mario to attend piano lessons, but the boy had just stopped going. Refused to get out of the car, and Tobey wasn't going to cause a scene by dragging an uncooperative 13-year-old boy out of a car worth more than most people's housing. At that thought, Tobey looked down at his arms. Then his xarms. That kind of thinking had caused him to raise his hands during a brainstorm and resulted in having two extra hands.

I think I'm going to sell my car, he thought. And then I'm going to spank the hell out of Mario. Without his explicit input, his xarms made spanking motions in front of him, and for the first time since that brainstorm, Tobey

smiled. His face split in half it was so wide. He began chuckling and then laughing, and then some backstage assistant ushered him onto the stage as the commercial ended.

Polite applause greeted him and soon faded as a hush came over the audience, as men and women who had seen every disease, every deformity, every advance in modern science, were awed to silence by a man with four arms.

He raised them as Ivanovich, at the podium, announced Xarmcaps, and introduced the first man able to play Mozart properly, Tobey Nakamura. The audience clapped softly as Tobey approached the podium to recite the speech prepared by the ad agency.

The response was underwhelming; the people in the audience had eyes that could see radio waves, feet that could climb concrete walls and teeth that could chew titanium. What use had they for two more clumsy hands in a world that used touch less and less. In the dongle hiding in his ear, Ivanovich told him to finish it up, that he was dying out there.

When Tobey went backstage, Ivanovich was screaming into a phone. He clapped it shut and stared at Tobey. "Come here, kid." He put his arm around Tobey's newly-shaped shoulders. "That was the Board. They've decided to scrap the xarms project—GenRx's instantaneous gender-flipping pill has won this year. We're refocusing on bustcaps—gonna try to sell to the 'new' woman."

Tobey stopped and looked at his boss. "So what does this mean for me?" He raised both sets of hands and wiggled his bottom set of fingers. He looked at the boss, who had an internal "infection" that allowed him to breathe underwater. He'd never had to walk down the street carrying four bags of groceries in four separate hands. He'd never had to endure stares from a bunch of freaks who'd volunteered to alter themselves just to stand out.

His niggling inner voice laughed at him. Tobey had never quite mastered denial.

"Oh, don't worry. It wasn't *your* idea that failed us. You've still got your job." Ivanovich smiled at the world's only four-armed man, a mixture of pity and cruelty. "Let's get you back to the hotel, son."

As they left the crowd and the P3 conference hall, Tobey wished he had asked for wings instead.

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## **Pear Shaped**

### By Daniel R. Robichaud

Nigel Roegerg was a mathematician with a specialty in nonlinear equations. He taught classes in some of the basic Chaos theories, such as the Butterfly Effect, May's bifurcations and the Mandlebrot set (those featuring aesthetically intriguing computer graphics with which to dazzle Norton College's predominantly anti-intellectual student body).

Imagine his surprise when he awoke Saturday morning, on the couch in his living room, with a splitting hangover, and raised a hand to his head only to discover that instead of responding properly, the limb slithered from the edge of the couch and draped across his chest in a wholly unnatural manner.

At the heart of all mathematics lie formulae. At the heart of any formula lies form. Structure. So it is with mathematicians. They dwell so closely with *form* that it becomes ingrained into their very beings. Even specialists in nonlinearity deal with limit cycles and numerically based models, which are the lingua franca of constraining awkwardly unpredictable systems inside comprehensible boundaries.

That his body should break form so startled him, Nigel actually cursed in a manner he hadn't considered for the last thirty four years, since he'd been a boy of seven: "What the flux?"

Nigel tried to raise the arm straight up. At first, it would not move, and panic set in. Then, as though thoughts had become the charge through a fluorescent light bulb necessitating a moment before heating the filament enough to illuminate, the fingers bent backwards until they were perpendicular to his palm. There, they remained wobbling like especially sturdy blades of grass in a gentle breeze. Then, the palm bent, rolling backward until it was perpendicular to his wrist. Then, the wrist wrapped round. The components did not disturb one another, did not bend those that moved before into a spiral or loop. Instead, his whole arm was slowly folding at right angles to itself until every component pointed toward the ceiling. Thus, his limb crept into an upright position, where it remained for nearly a minute, a sapling whipped back and forth by hurricane winds, and then promptly drooped over the edge of the couch to hang like limp, wet

laundry.

Strangest of all, through this whole unusual affair Nigel experienced no pain, merely a tingling in his arm and a terribly potent case of nauseating horror in his head, gut and soul.

The mirror beside the entertainment center revealed a terrible truth:

The condition was not contained to a single limb. All the skin of his body bulged curiously over the lumps of muscle, fat and cartilage or lay in wrinkled valleys flat against the couch's cushions.

Nigel had no bones.

None in his arms. None in his legs. None in his torso. None in his head. Not a single bone *anywhere* in his body.

They'd all vanished during the night.

He sucked in breath. Amazingly, he *felt* everything working properly. The diaphragm shifted in his formless blob of a belly, filled his lungs with air that theoretically underwent the normal biological process to oxygenate the blood, which still moved through his arteries and veins. He knew this last process was occurring, because his heart was pounding faster than a rock-'n-roll drummer.

I'm alive, he thought, but I *shouldn't* be. A person doesn't lose all his bones without losing his *life*, too.

What happened? Where did they *go*?

They were certainly not present. Not even fragments. He'd feel if there were wouldn't he? Tiny pellets rubbing against one another as his muscles flexed?

Why aren't I cut to pieces?

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that bones couldn't be freed from flesh without cutting through the skin.

Had they dissolved? Was calcium rich goop now inside him? He hoped not, but there was no way to know for sure.

Suddenly, dread hit him: how can I go to work?

This was immediately followed by a case of self-loathing. *My body has undergone a major alteration and* work *is the only thing I can think of*?

When he recalled that this was the first day of a long, holiday weekend, the point became moot.

He spent several minutes worrying over the question of what had happened, before he realized that with the lack of available data, that question was insoluble.

He momentarily wondered how his limbs could move at all. Wasn't movement a result of ligaments or muscles bound between bones tensing and relaxing? Weren't bones required for most of this stuff?

I should have paid more attention to biology...

Nigel recalled the mathematical model for generating numerical values for the viscoelastic properties of striated muscle tissue—a paper he'd written with Physiologist Peter Grease almost twenty years ago—but this did little good for him, now.

Can I sit up?

He found that with difficulty he actually *could*, in a manner of speaking.

Instead of bending at the waist, scissor-like, his head, neck and chest followed his arm's example. They rolled forward over top of his torso—his body had become a living, tank tread—until they'd reached his waist where they stretched up, pushing his face toward the ceiling, as though he were a flower straining for the sun. There he sat.

Huh...

Can I stand?

Again, yes. Sort of. With difficulty.

It took several exhausting minutes for his body to approximate a stance. Sheer will held him up.

Huh, again.

When his concentration slipped, his muscles relaxed and he collapsed. The sound of him hitting the hardwood floor was comparable to a sealed Ziploc bag filled with yogurt dropped on linoleum. The pain was similar to the world's worst belly flop.

That fall jarred loose memories from last night.

He'd gone to a pub's grand opening with colleagues. What was the place called? Ah, yes... <u>Barbonies</u>.

After an hour, his faculty friends had gone home to wives and families. Because his house was empty of those fetters, Nigel remained to close the place.

He wasn't alone long.

A trio of young ladies eager to explore Daddy fixations chatted him up. Nothing sexual, pure flirtation. One of them revealed that she'd been a student in his class but hadn't passed muster to remain a math major.

"Mathematics requires dedication," Nigel explained. "You have to eat, sleep, screw and live it." He chuckled. "You could say it's in my bones."

Just a tossed off comment. One of those things a person says and almost instantly forgets, until events conspire to grant the comment retroactive ironic importance. Events such as making an off the cuff remark about your bones and then waking up to discover those bones were *missing*.

Were those three girls responsible?

He almost laughed at the foolishness of this notion. How could a trio of lackluster college undergrads pull off a feat like absconding with

someone's skeleton but leaving the victim otherwise unharmed? If they could manage *that* then why should they *fail* multi-dimension calculus exams, as they'd mentioned doing? As complex as integration over several variables may be, it paled in comparison to complete bone extraction...

What about Linda? His ex-wife had called him "spineless" on plenty of occasions. *If she could only see him now...* 

An equally foolish line of thinking. Linda had no bad feelings, now. Leaving him was the best thing she could have done, or so she'd communicated through her lawyer. He could only imagine the bliss her life had since become.

Had someone *else* been listening in? Something else, perhaps?

Monsters or aliens or mad scientists who just *happened* to be tuned to one of a *million* watering holes in any one of a couple *hundred-thousand* college towns where nothing truly exciting ever happens, at the instant *one* insignificant mathematics professor had spoken that single, damning phrase?

Smacked more of coincidence than design.

Nigel puzzled over the situation for several minutes before again concluding there was little point in the effort. Though the dangling questions of *who*, *why* and *how* nagged him as they would anyone, there existed too little initial information.

The problem was insoluble.

The real question he needed to consider was: what would he do next? This seemed straightforward enough.

Sit. Stand. Walk.

Contract the muscles enough to restore some semblance of order. This way he could call for help.

Would hospitals and doctors be able to do anything? Unknown. Bone could be transplanted, but what about whole skeletons? Unknown. Could... So many unknowns!

What did it matter if he could walk?

How could he get on with life as though nothing was different? Everything was different! It'd all gone pear shaped.

Nigel was pear shaped.

He blubbered. His limbs flailed like noodles against the floorboards. It was nothing short of a tantrum. It lasted nearly twenty minutes.

In the hollow left by that emotional outpouring, when he felt there were no more options available, Nigel's mind echoed his two-word work ethic. *Never Submit*.

A simple maxim, perhaps, but it had seen him through much. When the uncertainties of life's future and his role in it had struck

during his undergraduate days, he had not buckled beneath them. When his graduate research advisor had claimed every one of Nigel's ideas for his own, he had not quit. When his wife of fourteen years left to explore her (until then unrevealed) polyamory, he hadn't given up. When the grant money dried up and lean times became emaciated ones, well he'd *almost* surrendered, but that simple maxim work ethic nurtured a grain of strength and saw him through.

So, he was now merely a pile of meat, cartilage and liquid. He was still *alive*, still *aware*.

Still Nigel Roegerg.

Lying there in the moist remnants of his own misery, he had a new thought. When a model shifted beyond paradigmatic limits and entered a regime originally thought impossible, it was time to change the established limits or change equations.

Maybe someone could help with this boneless problem, maybe not, but the only way to find out was to achieve a baseline to work from.

Sit, stand and walk. That seemed like the best starting point.

Bones or no, if he could do those things, he could still call himself an animal. Not really a man, anymore: he was an invertebrate, after all. There would be time enough to discover details of exactly what he had become once the foundation was set.

Sit. Check.

Stand. Not well and not for long.

Walk?

Maybe, by weekend's end, he'd have enough control to call someone. Tuesday, at the outside.

What if I get hungry? Thirsty? Have to pee or go number two? Motivation for expediency.

What if this was not affecting one, insignificant mathematics professor in a small, midwestern college town? What if the *entire world* had gone pear shaped?

For the moment, that didn't matter. A question like that was beyond the scope of his current data.

Sit. Stand -

Dammit.

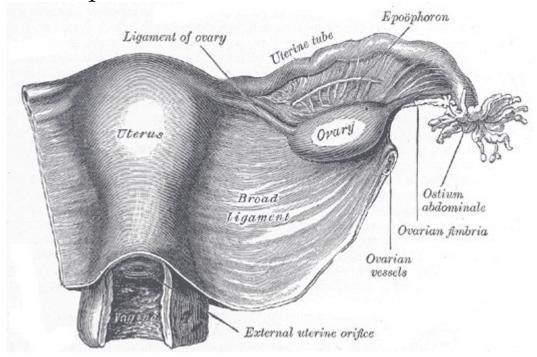
Maybe next time.

Or not.

Hopefully, soon.

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# VII. Reproductive



"If you want my body, and you think I'm sexy, come on baby, let me know..."

Rod Stewart

#### Hormones

## By Steve Calvert

Keith was tired. He leant over the sink and splashed some water into his eyes. Then he straightened up and looked in the mirror. And saw spots. Lots of spots: big, red, angry mountains of spots, he was growing the Rockies on his face and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Keith!" his mother shouted up the stairs.

"Yeah?"

"Breakfast."

"Coming, mum." He took a last look in the mirror. Life was a bitch.

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Keith looked at the spots of congealing grease on the rim of his plate. Then he looked at the eggs... and the bacon... and the sausage. He was sixteen and he had hormones - mutinous hormones that gave him desires that he wouldn't have had five years ago, but also gave him a face that ensured that it was very unlikely that he would get to do anything about those desires. Not for the foreseeable future anyway. Risings and swellings of the flesh. That was what being a teen was all about: risings and swellings of the flesh, and he had them at both ends of his body. The ones on his face made the one in his pants as useless as the spot creams and face scrubs that he'd been using. Life was not just a bitch; it was an unfair bitch too.

"Are you just going to sit there all day Keith?"

"Sorry mum?"

"You're breakfast's going to get cold."

It looked cold already. And greasy. "I don't really fancy a cooked breakfast this morning mum."

"Wha—you might have said. What's up with you, are you sickening for something?" She pressed a clammy hand against his head. "You don't have a temperature." The hand went away.

"It's not that. I think I'd just prefer cereal from now on, that's all."

"Cereal! Whatever for? You'll never last till lunchtime on cereal."

"It's just...."

"Yes?"

"Just."

She looked at him, hands on hips.

"It's the grease, mum...."

She still looked at him, only now she was either a little bit shocked or a lot angry. It was hard for him to tell.

"I just don't think it does my spots any good, that's all."

"Oh, I see. My breakfasts are giving you spots, is that it?"

"No, mum."

"Well, that's what you're saying isn't it?"

"No, mum."

"Well, it certainly sounds like it."

The silence seemed to stretch on for eternity, for Keith anyway. Whatever he said now would be wrong, and he struggled to speak at all, feeling the blood rushing into his cheeks and making his spots throb in time to his heart. It was almost as if they were mocking him.

His mother leaned down and picked up his plate. She took it over to the bin and scraped it in. Keith felt guilty now. He hadn't meant to hurt her feelings.

She brought over a packet of cereal and put it on the table in front of him. Then some milk, and then a bowl. The spoon was already in the bowl.

"Sugar?" She asked.

He thought about it. He needed to be firm with himself. "No thanks, mum."

His mother returned to the sink and stated washing up. "You'll waste away." She said.

\*\*\*

All through maths his hormones were playing up and he hoped that he didn't get called out to the board. Half his class was girls, and that didn't help his problem at all. He'd actually counted the class once, and it really was split down the middle—half boys and half girls. He wondered what would happen if everyone had to pair up. Who would he get? Probably Lorraine Belmont. Her spots were even worse than his. Lorraine sat three desks down from him and to his left. Keith stopped looking at Jenny Gosham and turned his attention to Lorraine. Her spots were bad, but she still had good legs. He looked at them now, curling back underneath her seat. He could also see the way her left breast pushed against the white material of her blouse. He wondered what she looked like naked, and thought that he wouldn't mind about the spots—in certain circumstances. Risings and swellings of the flesh. Jenny saw him looking at her, scowled, and flicked him the finger. Keith turned his attention back to Jenny Gosham.

He should have been paying attention to the teacher.

"Keith Brown." Mr. Bennett's voice cut through the silence of the room. "Since you don't feel the need to even look at the board, I can take it that you know all about the equilateral triangle, can I?"

"No, Sir."

"No, Sir? You're not an expert on the subject then?"

"No, Sir."

"No. Well, you never will be if you don't learn to pay attention. Perhaps you could come out to the board and show the class what you *do* know." He held up a stick of chalk and turned halfway towards the board. His bald head turning first to the board and then back to Keith while the chalk remained where it was waiting for Keith to take it. "Well, come on then boy."

"But please sir, I don't think—"

"There's a lot to be learned from mistakes Brown, now come on."

"But - "

"The board, Brown."

Every pair of eyes in the room was looking at him. He wished he'd brought his blazer, but the weather was too hot for wearing blazers.

"Brown, are you deaf, lad? The board."

Keith stood up and tried to think about football.

\*\*\*

Keith sat on his own for lunch. He had waited until late before going into the dining hall. It was nearly empty now, but those few that were still eating kept looking at him and giggling. He felt his face begin to burn again and once more the Rocky Mountains mocked him. He didn't feel very hungry. Perhaps he would be better off not eating his lunch anyway. All that they'd had left was chips. He'd wanted salad. Salad was healthier. Better for his skin.

For a long time now people had been calling him Spotty. Keith didn't like being called Spotty. It was better than Woody, though, and he wondered is he should bunk-off for the rest of the day.

Someone—a girl—let out a loud laugh. Keith automatically looked up, towards the sound. Sarah McLeod was sitting at the table near the door with Nora Wheelan. It was Nora that had laughed. They were both looking at him and nudging each other, giggling. Keith let his eyes fall to his chips and let them stay there. Bunking-off not only seemed more and more like a good idea, it seemed like an absolute necessity.

"Hello, Keith," a girl's voice said. He looked up. It was Jenny Gosham. He dropped his eyes back to his plate. The blood burned *in* his cheeks, and the Rockies burned *on* them.

"Can I sit down?"

"If you want." More ridicule. Keith wasn't sure that he could take it. Especially not off Jenny. She reached out and laid her hand on his.

"I was wondering if you would like to go out sometime." She asked.

This was a cruel joke and the tears in his eyes started to feel as hot as the blood in his cheeks. He was damned if he would show himself up by crying, though.

"Keith?"

"Yeah." He counted his chips. There were 33 on his plate.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what do you think?"

"That you're taking the piss."

"Why?" She pulled her hand away.

"Because I've got spots."

She laughed and Keith started to count his chips again.

"So? My brother has spots. My last boyfriend had spots."

"You don't have spots, though."

"So what? You discriminate against people without spots, or something?"

"No."

Her hand returned to his. Jenny's hand was warm and smooth, not clammy like his mother's.

"Why now?" Keith asked, and looked her in the eyes for the first time. They were blue.

"Oh... I don't know.... I've been thinking about it for a while, I suppose, and then, in maths, I suddenly saw you in a whole new light." She moved her hand to his leg, giving it a squeeze under the table, and Keith suddenly realized that girls had hormones, too.

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# Anatomy, Mechanics

By Jack Kaulfus

I'm sitting in a circle of fifteen people who are transitioning into womanhood without the aid of naturally occurring puberty. Directly across from me is Diane, tall, slim, the tips of her hair just touching the tops of her shoulders. She smiles at me, crossing her long legs, and I have to look away because her eyes are painfully kind and her chin is strong. I think that if I could be a woman, I'd want to be her. But I'm not a woman. Even though I'm the only one here born into a female body, I want out.

The rest of them are waiting for an introduction, because I'm still kind of new and refuse to wear a nametag. I see Diane nod knowingly as I give my birth name, which is undeniably feminine. It's a name I didn't have to work for.

"Is this your preferred name?" The woman addressing me is the leader, Abby. She's some kind of therapist. She asks me this every time, and I shake my head, no. But I don't have an alternative, and she doesn't press for one.

After a circle check-in, Abby clears her throat and announces the topic of the day: *Invisibility*. Who has it, who wants it, where it comes from and where it went. Diane begins by saying that *not* being invisible gets easier.

"Easy for you to say. You're gorgeous." This from Shannon, who has recently been through a divorce because her wife "could not deal with anybody else's vagina."

Diane shakes her head, unfazed. "Maybe. But last night I managed to get thrown out of the bathroom at fucking Garden Ridge Pottery."

A discussion of bathroom tactics ensues, and a list of safe local establishments, equipped with either unisex toilets or understanding employees, is passed around the circle again. I've got three of these at home, but I take another anyway, fold it, and put it in my pocket. Everyone in the room is white except for one woman sitting bolt upright with a flowered bag in her lap. She's newer than me, and her nametag says Alice. She raises her eyebrows and tells the group that in this town she's never invisible, whether she's passing as a woman or a man. Then she goes on to say that she feels like a coward - she hasn't come out to her girlfriend but she's been swiping the lipstick from their shared bathroom.

Abby nods encouragingly. She's wearing a well-cut navy blue business suit, and her rings are large, yellow. I wonder, briefly, if these pieces are meant to distract from the hugeness of her knuckles. I envy these women, some of them still in full beards, some in sophisticated wigs, size 13 sandals. They are done with questions, on a certain path. And even though I am also carefully constructed, there's no evidence of struggle in my physical appearance. My cheeks are smooth, my shoes and hair typical of a butch dyke. In public, I don't register as anything crazily out of the ordinary. Nothing of the *cusp* I insist is the reason behind everything I do, think, say. My own fingers are completely bare. After the meeting, Diane and I walk outside to smoke.

"It's been months now. You need to find some boys," she says, laying a hand on my shoulder. "You're hiding."

"That's not true," I tell her, "it's hard to come here every week."

"Save it for The Learning Channel. What is this?" She asks, sliding her fingers down my spine and over the ace bandage I use to bind my breasts flat. I shrug.

"There're better ways." She removes a cell phone from her purse and scrolls through her contact list. "I've got an old college friend, back in town for a few days. He can help. You need some better clothes, a proper binder, that kind of thing. That ace'll crack your ribs. Nobody wants that."

She grabs my hand and writes the number across my palm. I can smell the back of her neck as she does this, a brisk apple-y smell over iron. I recognize it—same as my menopausal mother's—hormones not of her own making coursing beneath the skin, beading on the surface. Maybe she's right. Maybe these women can't help me any further. I blow the ink dry and light another cigarette.

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At home, my apartment is in shambles. I've dismantled every electrical appliance and piece of furniture that Claire left. My stereo still works, but only because music is an essential part of the wrecking process. I've put the individual pieces in labeled zip-locks - I'll want to put everything back together, eventually. But just now, it's comforting to see the coffee pot, the cordless phone and other familiar things broken down to elemental plastic and wire.

I wish I had a predilection for violence, one that allowed for broken dishes and upended tables and the contents of kitchen drawers strewn across the floor. Instead, I can say that rage only brings unwanted contrition. Merely thinking about destroying my dirt devil requires me to go out and buy a new bag for it. But I am able to read an instruction booklet in

reverse. And I'm expert with a screwdriver.

I drop my keys on the counter and sit down at the kitchen table to work on the alarm clock I've been saving. It neglected to go off just often enough for Claire to accuse me of not knowing how to set it, so I feel a certain satisfaction when I accidentally snap the snooze button in half. I leave the snoozer where it lands and pick up a fork to pry off the rest of the buttons. I've been at it a few minutes when there's a knock at my door.

"Your doorbell doesn't work," says a wiry guy with earrings. He's about my height, and built in the shoulders.

I remove the doorbell cover to reveal the little box of wires I've dislocated.

He looks confused, but doesn't comment. "Diane gave me your address. I was taking a walk."

I look at my palm. The name and number have smeared. "You're  $\operatorname{Brit}.$ "

Inside, he sits down on the floor beside the gutted couch and accepts the can of soda that I offer.

"My girlfriend left," I say, as he examines a bag of small black screws.

"Diane calls you Pete," he says.

"I know."

"Am I supposed to call you something different?"

Diane had assigned me this name as a joke, a reference to my missing penis. But it was only because I refused to pick a name other than Jane, and she flatly refused to call me that. She tried to convince me that picking a new name is one of the perks of transitioning, but I just can't do it. And Pete seems to be wrapping himself around my identity.

"I don't really want to have this conversation with a complete stranger," I say.

"It's okay," Brit says, pulling the bottom of his t-shirt to his chin, exposing two long horizontal scars just below pierced nipples. As if I don't already know he's transitioned. I look away, quickly, thinking of ways to make him leave. I want to get back to work on the alarm clock.

"Nice guitar," he says, lowering his shirt and picking his way across the floor to my music stand. I look at it, and can make out dust on the fret board. It's slightly embarrassing. I haven't had a gig in months. I haven't practiced, either.

"Look," he says, running his finger along the E string, "I don't want to make you uncomfortable." He pronounces all the syllables in the word uncomfortable, making me wonder where he grew up, speaking like that. Then he straightens, and tells me he and Diane will pick me up for breakfast in the morning.

"Breakfast?" I ask. Diane and I have been meeting Saturday mornings at Gibbous Moon early, before the rush.

"Yeah, she invited me along. That's okay, right?"

"Sure," I say, going for casual. "See you."

About five o'clock in the morning, I start panicking about Brit showing up again at my house. He seems nice enough, but I don't want him to show me the world of peeing dick devices and super safe chest binders and new soap opera names like Aiden, Caden, Jaden or Braden. What I want is to go to sleep one evening and wake up in the morning with a new body. And I want my girlfriend back.

I've got Diane's number, but I can't call, because even though I've kept all the pieces to the phone, I can't get it back together well enough to make it work. I decide I don't have to answer the door when they come. I decide I don't even have to be in the apartment when they come. By seventhirty, I'm showered and on my way to breakfast at the IHOP Diane refuses to patronize.

I slide into a blue vinyl booth and light a cigarette. The server is a tall skinny white guy with nice, even teeth. His name tag says "Puppy" and I'm not sure why, but it's unsettling. He listens intently to my order, but doesn't write anything down. I don't ask for substitutions.

I've brought a book, and I'm enjoying the smoke and the smell of bacon frying on the grill in back when the entire booth rocks. Diane flips her hair behind her ears and smiles brilliantly.

"You're so obvious."

I tell her I'm hiding. "I'm not ready," I say.

Diane says, "I can change your mind."

Puppy brings my club sandwich and a glass of water for Diane. He blushes when she tells him that last year, she found a fingernail in her Eggs Benedict. "At that table right there." She points to the historic booth. Puppy doesn't know what to say, so he pulls a ketchup bottle from his apron, places it on the table, and disappears.

"Brit has a famous brother," Diane says.

"Gay famous or famous famous?" I say, thinking she's probably just lying.

"Depressed hipster famous."

"Don't care," I tell her. "I've read those stupid FtM transition boards and if Brit tries to adopt me I'm going to punch him. I'm nobody's project."

"Well, you need to be somebody's something."

"Who's the brother?" I ask.

"Put down the sandwich," she says.

In the end, Brit's famous brother wins. He might have been a harder

sell were I not already infatuated with his music. Until this point, I've never been afforded the opportunity test my fear of transition against the pull of Ryan McFadden. Diane tells me not to mention the reason I've come. "Brit hates being 'the brother,' even though he loves Ryan. So keep it under your hat unless he mentions it." She unfolds a ten dollar bill and lays it flat on the table. "Let's blow this cesspool."

I only have a few minutes to feel bad about the real reason I'm joining Brit and Diane for breakfast. I wonder if this will be a funny story to tell later, when we become real friends. When we get to the Gibbous Moon, Brit is already seated and smiling at the server, who is crouched at the end of the table. Brit's hair stands in shaky blue spikes from his head, and when I slide into the booth across from him, I'm embarrassed to feel so star struck. I want to avert my eyes, but force myself to look at him. When I do, it's as though he's been doing strange and precious things all night in his old blue work shirt with the sleeves ripped off.

"Didn't think you'd show," Brit says.

"Nice hair," I say.

"Diane did me," he says.

"Pete was hiding," Diane says, opening her menu. I don't know why she's pretending to read it. She orders the same thing every Saturday. The server brings a round of coffee, even though we haven't ordered any.

"I was not," I say.

Brit turns to Diane. "I'm worried about Pete," he says. "Have you seen the state of his apartment?"

Diane nods. "He's been at it for months. Since Claire left. You haven't started *buying* things to destroy, have you?"

"So where you from, Brit?" I ask.

"Los Angeles," Brit says. "But not originally. Originally from Asheville." Diane's foot nudges mine beneath the table, and I push back. It's an ordinary question.

"You don't sound southern."

Brit tells a story about his roommate, who happens to be Tom Petty's daughter. Apparently, there is enough room in her closet to park a Rolls Royce. "My room is off the deck," he says, pulling a picture from his wallet.

"That's my Mom," he says. She is standing under a tree, and in front of the deck is one of those sparkling green pools built to look like a natural pond.

"You live in the pool house?" I ask.

Brit shrugs. "I work in a record store. Can't afford Adria's closet."

"Pete's a musician," Diane says. She's trying to throw me off, but it doesn't work.

"A record store?" I ask. Diane's college was one of those tiny, fancy liberal arts universities with no majors. "What?" I turn to Diane. "You're a fucking editor. How did Brit get stuck in retail?"

Brit's face clouds a little. "I like music."

"I didn't mean it like that," I say, but Diane kicks me hard.

After breakfast, Diane goes to work and I offer to show Brit around town.

"Nah," he says, "let's go to your place." Inside, he goes straight to my fridge and pulls a bottle of white wine from the shelf in the door. "Got a corkscrew?" He asks. When I hand him one, he asks if Claire left me because of my impending transition. I tell him that Claire was complicated. She was smart, but had grammar issues. She read a lot of Joseph Campbell, and would go around at night, after I'd gone to bed, and gather together my wallet and keys and phone so I wouldn't have trouble finding them in the morning.

It'd been all right at first. I introduced the concept of gender fluidity as a kind of intellectual exercise. She liked those, because she was good at logically deconstructing somebody else's argument and forcing concession. She could be a vampire. When I started talking about my own congruence issues, she got ugly.

"I don't exactly like my body either, but this is what I was dealt," she'd said.

"By your maker?" I asked. She was a devout atheist.

"You don't got to believe in God to recognize that plastic surgery, for any reason, is dangerous. And self-indulgent."

"True love," Brit says, pouring the wine into two large glasses. He examines the alarm clock on the table, the remains of which I have not yet bagged and labeled. "You gonna put all this shit back together?" He asks. When I don't answer, Brit picks up a handful plastic pieces and walks to the middle of the apartment, where he drops everything on the floor. "I have an idea," he says, looking around the room. He walks to the sliding glass balcony doors and picks up a freezer bag.

"That's part of my amp," I tell him. Brit sets his wine glass down and opens the bag. He dumps the contents on top of the alarm clock. "Stop it," I tell him, kneeling at the pile. I'm trying to sort the pieces, which are different colors, as the rest of my amp rains down on top of my hands. When I look up, Brit smiles. There's another bag in his hand, and I grab for it. "I'm serious," I say.

"No shit," he replies, swinging the bag away from my hand. I reach for his knee and catch the fabric of his jeans before he steps back. He loses his balance, but catches himself with his hands. "Help me," I say. Brit laughs, but his eyes are hard. He pushes the bag into my chest. "You help me," he says. "Open the bag."

I look at the label. My mini-recorder. I used to carry it around in case I was lyrically inspired in the bank line or the grocery store aisle, but after I heard my voice on it, I never used it again. "I hate this recorder," I tell him.

"Dump the fucker." He walks to the stereo and pushes play on the CD player and I say a quick prayer of thanks it's not his brother's voice sailing from the speakers.

"I was a boy," he tells me as he comes to the table to refill his glass, "long before I transitioned."

"It's a living death," I say as he tops off my wine glass on the table.

"Don't be dramatic," he says. He grabs a hammer from my open toolbox, picks up the carcass of my old computer, and kneels at the pile of wire and plastic.

"Dump it," he says, nodding at the mini-recorder in my hands.

"I have downstairs neighbors."

"I have a hammer," he says, bringing it down hard on the keyboard from my old Macintosh. Keys fly. "You wanna try?" He asks. I shake my head. The muscles in his arms are pre-pubescent—long and ropy and somehow new. His shoulders are just barely wider than his hips, and I think I can still see a trace of who he was before in the way he carries his head.

I open the bag. I dump out the pieces. It doesn't feel like anything. I don't feel liberated like I think he wants me to. Then I stand and watch him. "How long have you known?" I ask. Brit doesn't hear me. His left hand is high, holding the wine, and his right is smashing, smashing. He is beautiful. I tell him about the fight I had with Claire, the night before she left. He doesn't quit hammering.

Afterward, Brit insists we do something productive with the pieces. "My brother and I did this once," he says. "But we were high. And the stuff wasn't ours. This is better."

"Why do you work in a record store?" I ask.

"Why are you still sitting on your ass? Dump some more bags and then find me some glue."

It's in the toolbox. I hand it over and he liquid nails the top of my coffeepot to the door frame. "I was an art major," he says. "Diane's got a painting of mine in her hallway." I take the glue from him and adhere a small shard of the snooze button to the wooden frame beneath the lid.

Claire and I lived in the apartment for five years. It had been her place first, had seen another girlfriend come and go before I arrived. On the second floor of a three story complex, surrounded on all sides by other apartments and a wavy asphalt parking lot, the apartment had the cloistral

feeling of a stalled elevator. We couldn't paint the white walls or put holes in them. We had to hang everything with putty, which lent the place a perpetual teenage angstiness.

Claire left six months into our fourth lease renewal. One long night we had a final fight about chest reconstruction, and she told me if she'd known I was traveling this path sooner, she'd never have got involved with me in the first place.

"How can you just decide you are no longer *yourself*? I mean, what if you discover you were 'always' a Vietnam vet? You gonna cut off your foot?" I stayed on the couch, and the next day when I got home from work her empty hangers were still humming on the metal bar in our closet. We haven't spoken since.

Claire mailed everything I had ever given her — from reminder notes I'd left on the kitchen counter to the pocket watch I'd presented to her on her 25<sup>th</sup> birthday — back to me about a month after she'd left. I couldn't touch the ring, but I took the watch apart.

I empty a small tube of modeling glue into the lid of a jelly jar and swim the gears and springs in the sharp-smelling liquid. I toss the engraved backside into the trash. I don't want to see it anymore. Then I remove the coated pieces and attach them, one by one, to the plastic microwave keypad, which Brit has glued to the inside of the empty fishtank. It looks terrible. The gears slide into each other. But the precision this task requires is satisfying.

I look over at Brit, who's taken off his shirt and tucked it into the waist of his blue jeans. I don't know why. Maybe it's just because he can. He's cutting something with my kitchen shears. When he turns around, he's got a row of instruction pamphlet paper dolls. The scars on his chest are only a little lighter than the rest of his skin, and I can see fine blonde hairs curling over them. He strings the paper dolls, Japanese Character-side facing out, across the top of the entertainment center.

Brit and I go though a second bottle of wine, some leftover cooking sherry, and three tubes of liquid nails before we're finished collaging the back wall. Brit sinks onto a couch cushion on the floor and cradles his head in his hands.

"Bad sherry," he says.

"I should pay you," I tell him, sitting down next to him. There are starry night whorls of screws running along the top of the picture window, a life size slatted horse tied to a cactus spined with broken rabbit ear antenna. Filling the empty hole where the television sat is half an ancient laptop - black heat coils from the toaster are plastered against the backdrop of white keyboard letters, forming a winter cityscape on the screen. We've left the Erasure poster intact, and one of the corners flutters as the air conditioner

starts up. It's dusk. The stereo has long been silent. "Does your brother live in L.A., too?" I ask.

Brit squints at me. "What did Diane tell you about me?"

"You're supposed to adopt me or something."

"My brother's dead. He doesn't live in L.A." Brit drops his head back into his hands. "Let's get out," he says.

Brit and I are about the same size, so I loan him a pair of jeans and a jacket. Diane meets us downtown. She's been out on a dinner date with a man she now hates.

"He's in reality television," is all she will say.

Earle Thompson's playing at the Oil Rig, and by the time we arrive, his first set of the night is already half over. Earle's kind of a phenomenon around Texas - his first single hit number one on the western swing charts back in the mid fifties, and he was in the closet until a couple of years ago. Miraculously, a lot of his original fans still come to the shows — they form long lines at the doors of dying lesbian clubs or pool halls, ancient vinyl albums in hand. It's not just the old-timers, though. There's a whole legion of young gay folk quick to iconize an old guy with the guts to make a comeback in rhinestones. I love the aging sequins along Earle's collar and yellowing mother of pearl in the frets of his guitar. I'm not much of a dancer. I like to sit close enough to watch him pick his guitar.

The ceiling is low and the audience is sweaty. A young man in a tight faded snap-shirt and rectangular glasses steps in front of me, blocking my view, and offers his hand to a woman standing at the left side of the stage. She's got to be sixty-five, in high heeled boots and day-glo lipstick, and they dance the next three songs before he spins her, breathless, back into her group of friends. She bumps into me on her way to the bar. She might already be a little drunk. She steadies herself on my shoulder, and then kisses my cheek.

"You boys are so sweet," she says.

Earle unstraps his guitar while his band, The Pecos Valley Boys, launch into Orange Blossom Special. He steps from the stage and ambles into the audience to enjoy the next couple of dance numbers with his pick of the cowboys.

I leave Brit and Diane at the table and make my way through the crowd for a round of drinks. In front of me, a twink bellies up to the bar and whistles. His bracelets clink as he raises a whiskey shot high above his head. I watch him pivot gracefully, looking for someone to toast. He's gorgeous, and I hate him the way I hate all beautiful men who can do this sort of thing - turn, blind, knowing some stranger from the crowd will be waiting there to connect. I order two beers, and think I catch sight of Claire's

profile at the other end of the bar. We used to come to Earle's shows together, and it's not exactly an accident that I've brought Brit here tonight. I don't recognize her shirt.

Claire's talking to the barback, and I can almost hear her voice over the music. My heart is a hammer. I imagine her face is different, that the six months away from me have issued harder lines around her mouth, bags beneath her eyes. Behind us, the band has segued into San Antonio Rose, and the steel guitar is deafening. "Claire," I say, but she doesn't hear.

Brit appears at my side. He pays the waiting bartender and grabs his beer. "We surrendered the table," he says in my ear. "Old woman on the verge of collapse."

"That's her," I say to Brit, pointing at Claire across the bar.

Brit looks at her. Then he looks at me and stands up straight. "We're about the same height," he says.

"So?"

"So what color are your eyes?" Brit grabs my chin and brings my face close to his own. "Close enough," he says. "Give me your glasses." He takes a swig of his beer, hands it to me, and heads straight for Claire.

Through the bobbing heads, I watch him tap her on the shoulder. She turns, and when I squint, I think I can see that her face is no different. At least not the way I'd imagined. She looks confused, then says something and pushes Brit back a little so she can get by. Brit steps aside, but bends and says something in her ear as she passes. Claire is small, but she's solid, and when she turns around again, she throws all her weight behind a single punch. As Brit goes down, Claire backs up and is folded into a group of people I recognize as friends from her work. It's simple, not at all like the brawls on television. The music doesn't stop, and by the time the bouncer gets to the scene, Claire and her friends are gone.

I circle around the back of the bar and find that Brit's been helped to his feet by a busty girl who's claiming she's not drunk and should probably drive him home. The bouncer tells Brit he needs to leave. Scared we'll lose Diane, I take a quick detour into the bathroom and find her talking to a handsome dyke about reality television. I tell her we have to go.

"What the fuck was that?" I ask outside. Brit's lip is bleeding. The handsome dyke has followed us outside and is standing close to Diane, listening to our conversation.

"She didn't recognize you," Brit says. "I thought she'd be surprised, but I didn't think she'd *hit* you."

"She didn't hit me," I say.

Brit nods. "Told her I was you. Started testosterone."

"No way she believed you."

"Me, or you?" He hands my glasses back. They're broken. "Sorry, man," he says.

Neither Brit nor I can drive now, so Diane hands her card to the concerned dyke, gives her a peck on the cheek, and leads Brit and I toward her car. While Diane tends to Brit's lip at the kitchen sink, I walk down the hallway to look at his painting. I know which one it is—a nude on a rooftop, stepping off the edge into nothingness. The edges are a little blurry, so I close one eye and look through an unbroken lens of my glasses to see whether the blur is part the art or part of my perception. The signed name is Britney Sellers.

"This is good," I say, loud enough for Brit to hear.

Holding ice to his purpling chin, he drops heavily onto the couch and sighs. "It's complete shit," he says.

Diane agrees, removing her pumps and sitting beside him. "You don't know anything about art."

"I know about music, though," I tell her. She shoots me a warning look, so I decide to press on. There's nothing much to lose. Diane lied me into a vanity corner, and as a result, Claire's gone, now, for good. "Especially Ryan McFadden."

Brit nods, confusedly and readjusts the ice against his skin.

"It's been a long day, fellas," Diane says, watching my face.

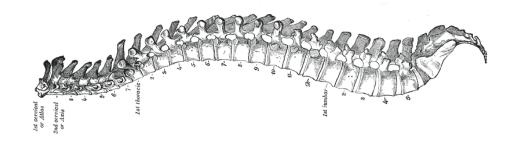
Brit looks from Diane to me. "What am I missing?"

"Nothing," I say. He's okay. A nice enough guy. But while he's given me some distracting things to look at on the wall, he's also guaranteed that Claire will never see them.

I walk home by myself, hung over and hungry for the first time since breakfast. I wonder, as I open the door to my apartment, whether I'll wake up feeling better. I wonder if tonight will be the night something changes. I leave the living room lights out and pick around the mess on the floor on my way to the bedroom.

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### **Contributors**



**Shaindel Beers** is currently a professor of English at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton, Oregon. Her poetry, fiction, and social commentary have appeared in *Willow Review*, *Poetry Miscellany*, *Hunger Mountain*, and numerous other journals and publications. She serves as Poetry Editor of *Contrary* (www.contrarymagazine.com).

**Randall Brown** teaches writing at Saint Joseph's University. He is a Pushcart nominee and holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from Vermont College and a BA from Tufts University. His stories, poems, and essays have been published widely, with recent work appearing or forthcoming in *Hunger Mountain*, *Connecticut Review*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Vestal Review*, *Cairn*, *King's English*, and others. He's recently finished a collection of (very) short fiction, *Mad to Live*.

**Steve Calvert** lives in the UK and is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. Although Steve's passion is for horror, his sense of humor sometimes gets the better of him, as you can see from his story. Steve's fiction has appeared in *Best, The New Cauldron, Dark of Night, Whispers of Wickedness, Chillout, Lookout, & Scriptor 6*. Steve's website can be found at www.steve-calvert.co.uk and he blogs at www.blog-from-the-darkside.mr-c.me.uk. Steve Calvert does not have spots.

**Daniel Euphrat** currently resides in Tucson, AZ. His one goal in life is to make the world just a little bit stranger. He may be contacted at: x918x@hotmail.com

Kathie Giorgio's writing credits include stories in Fiction International, Dos

Passos Review, The Pedestal, Bayou, Eclipse, Potomac Review, Arabesques Review, Oyez Review, Jabberwock Review, Karamu Review, Reed Magazine, The Binnacle, Zuzu's Petals Quarterly, Licking River Review, Thema, Bellowing Ark, in the premier issue of SLAB and in the premier issue of Broken Bridge Review. In the near future, stories will appear in the Hurricane Review, Midway Journal, The Externalist, and Hiss Quarterly. Her stories have also appeared in such magazines as Buffalo Spree and Passager, among many others, as well as in Papier Mache Press's last anthology, Generation to Generation. She holds her BA in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin—Madison, and her MFA in Fiction Writing from Vermont College. She is the director of AllWriters' Workplace and Workshop, LLC, and she is also the editor/owner/publisher of Quality Women's Fiction magazine. She teaches online for Writers' Digest.

**Bryon Howell** has been writing since he was a child. Over the course of time, his poetry has appeared in over 400 in-print and online magazines including *The Raintown Review, Blind Man's Rainbow,* and *Flashquake*. Bryon also writes and publishes under an array of pen-names.

**Shannon Dugan Iverson** is an archaeologist and a fledgling graduate student at the University of Texas. When she does not have her nose in a book she enjoys cooking vegetarian meals and engaging in idealistic banter with anyone willing to participate. She is not planning on quitting her day job.

**Jack Kaulfus** is a recent graduate of the MFA fiction writing program at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. Her story "Troglodytes" was nominated by Stickman Review for the Million Writer's Award, and was later named a notable story of 2007 by *storySouth*. Currently, she is a lecturer and a window washer in Austin, Texas, where she lives with her partner and two children.

**E.E. King** has a varied background; theater, comedy, dance, teaching, painting & science. She is the recipient of two International Tides Painting fellowships and two Earthwatch fellowships. Her artwork can be viewed at http://www.simplesite.com/ElizabethEve, her Myspace is at www.myspace.com/eeviek, and her blog is at http://eek-deepinsideofa.blogspot.com/. She has worked as a teacher and as an artist-in-residence in Los Angeles, San Francisco and South Korea. She was an advisor to the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Science Center for their Arts & Science Development Program and a science and art coordinator in Bosnia

with Global Children's Organization. She is the Arts & Science Director of Esperanza Community Housing Corporation a nonprofit in South Central Los Angeles. Ms. King is always involved in anything nonprofit and would one day like to make a profit. Her mural, *A Meeting of Minds* (121' X 33') can be seen in downtown Los Angeles. She has published field reports for Earth watch in animal communication and lesson plans on Portraiture and genetics for the J. Paul Getty Museum and Science Center.

**Bill Kte'pi** was hospitalized in 2002 and is not entirely confident of anything that followed, including his publications in *Strange Horizons* and *ChiZine*, his website (http://www.ktepi.com), or the coming and going of Pepsi Blue.

**J.R. Parks** is a march-stepping outlander, dwelling in San Jose California. His time is vigorously spent sculpting his career as both a writer and graphic novelist; and many of his pieces have been published both nationally and internationally. Parks enjoys a good cup of tea, bright amber trees, and old folks that never forget. Some of his projects have been posted on his website: www.jrparks.com, as well as his humble blog: *Ziggy's Tree House* (ziggytree.blogspot.com).

**J.F. Peterson's** recent publications include "My Bonny" at *Fusion Fragment* and upcoming appearances in *Postscripts* and *Aberrant Dreams*. A Writers of the Future first place winner, he recently completed *My Friend Molly (the mole)*, a novel about an unlikely pair of best friends, and is at work on another novel involving a thirteen pound furry purple elephant. He lives in New Jersey with his wife and daughter.

**Kristi Petersen's** short fiction has been featured in *The Adirondack Review*, *Barbaric Yawp*, *The Illuminata, Chick Flicks, Afternoon, The Circle, Citizen Culture, I Like Monkeys, New Witch Magazine, The Taj Mahal Review, Toasted Cheese, MudRock: Stories & Tales, Waxing & Waning, The Wheel, and a host of others; her work will also be featured in the upcoming anthology <i>Beacons of Tomorrow* (Tyrannosaurs Press). She is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Goddard College in Vermont. Her website is www.kristipetersen.net.

**Dianne Rees** is a freelance writer. Her fiction works have appeared in *Vestal Review* (nominated for a Pushcart Prize), *Spillway Review*, *Farmhouse* 

Magazine, The Scruffy Dog Review, Planet Magazine, Universe Pathways, Bewildering Stories, The Harrow, Halfway Down the Stairs, Atomjack, and Neon. Examples of her nonfiction work may found at www.calloohcomm.com.

**Daniel R. Robichaud** lives and writes in central Massachusetts. Days find him playing the part of research engineer at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. By night, he scribbles strange stories. His fiction and poetry have found homes in markets such as *Florida Horror*, *Forgotten Worlds*, *Spacesuits and Sixguns*, and *Goblin Fruit*. Look for more stories in such upcoming venues as *Until Somebody Loses an Eye* (an anthology of humorous horror from Twisted Publications), *Vermin* (an anthology of creepy, crawling horror from Carnifex Press), *Tower of Light Fantasy Magazine* (online), and *Blazing Adventures Magazine* (online).

**Jason Sanford** has a story forthcoming in *Interzone* and has published fiction in *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Tales of the Unanticipated, The Mississippi Review, Pindeldyboz, Diagram,* and other journals and magazines. One of his critical essays was recently published in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. He is the recipient of a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship and edits the literary journal *storySouth* at http://www.storysouth.com/.

#### On Editing an Anthology\*

by Sheos

Just for the record, I'd like to say that I, now more than ever, absolutely hate Adicus Garton, the Rev Brian Worley, and James Maddox with all my heart. I hate them like I hate bad drivers and people that can do nothing more than talk to me about football (No. Really, he actually tossed the fucking ball to some guy? And he did *what* with it? Oh, that's just disturbing). I hate them more than I hate stuffed jellyfish and baby manatees and monocles.

Most likely, I hate them just as much, I'm sure, as they hate me and each other.

During the selection process that came with the closing of submissions in August, we started out at one table, tossing massive amounts of paper back and forth like Frisbees — yes, you can do that, to a certain extent. We'd give thumbs up and thumbs down on the obvious ones, and for a little while, things were good.

Then came round two.

Editing a fiction anthology really makes you question who your friends are. When you are afraid to go to sleep because you're guarding a set of stories that absolutely must make it into the anthology, guarding them with your life, under blade and shield, knowing that the briefest of brief naps could end in fiction theft and possibly a slit throat, you come to find that those people you'd trusted only a few days ago are now your sworn enemies.

However, having said that, I couldn't think of better people to put together an anthology with.

In *I Am This Meat*, you don't find yourself being told the same story over and over again. The subjects and plots you'll find in its pages are amazingly diverse, and it's all due to the talent of the writers, and the full-blown, nearly destructive hostility we four editors hold for what the other says is Spot-on Right.

Overall, I've very proud of what we've accomplished here. And as strange as it sounds, I can't wait for the next one.

<sup>\*</sup>Sheos had no part in editing this anthology. -Eds.

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